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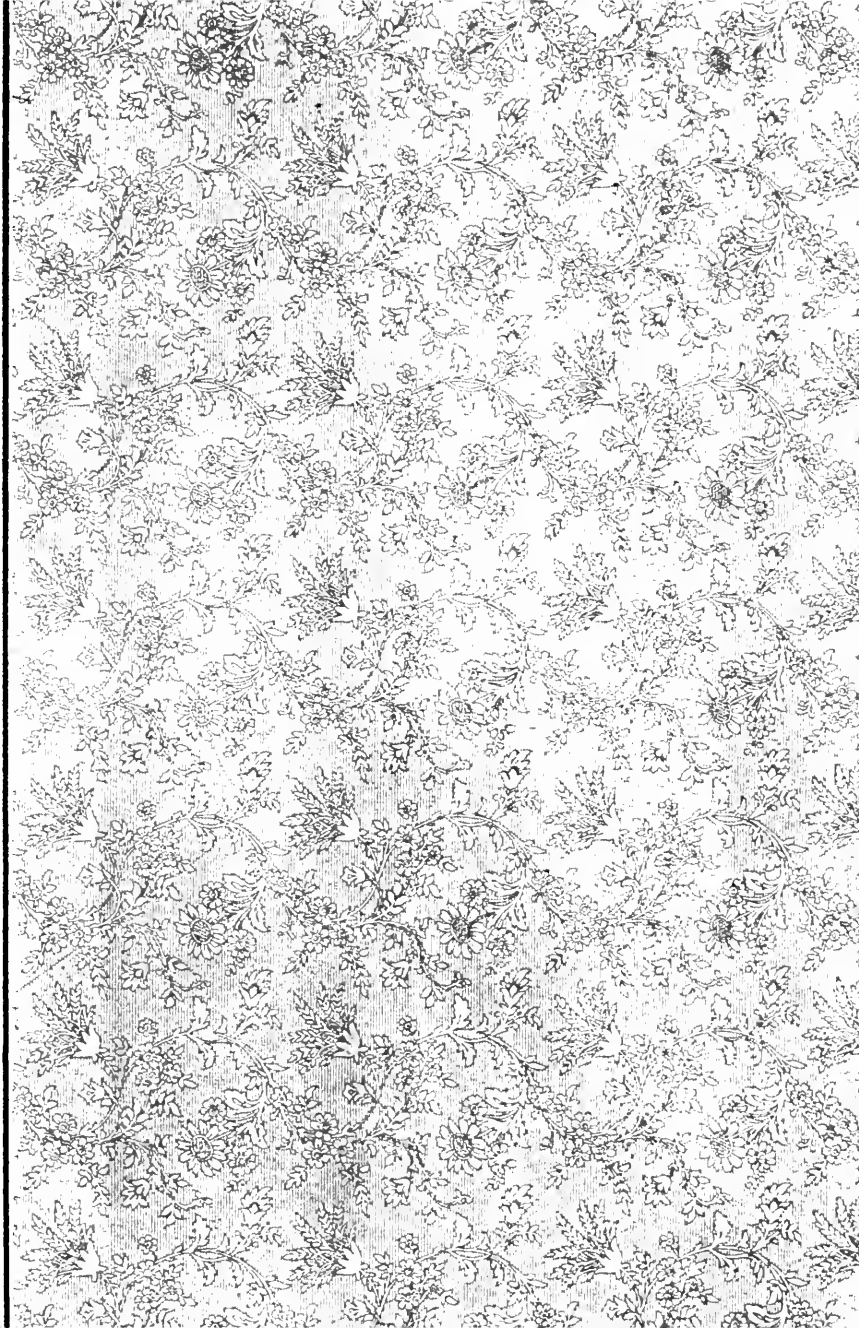


# THE HERITAGE OF BURNS

W. R. TURNBULL.







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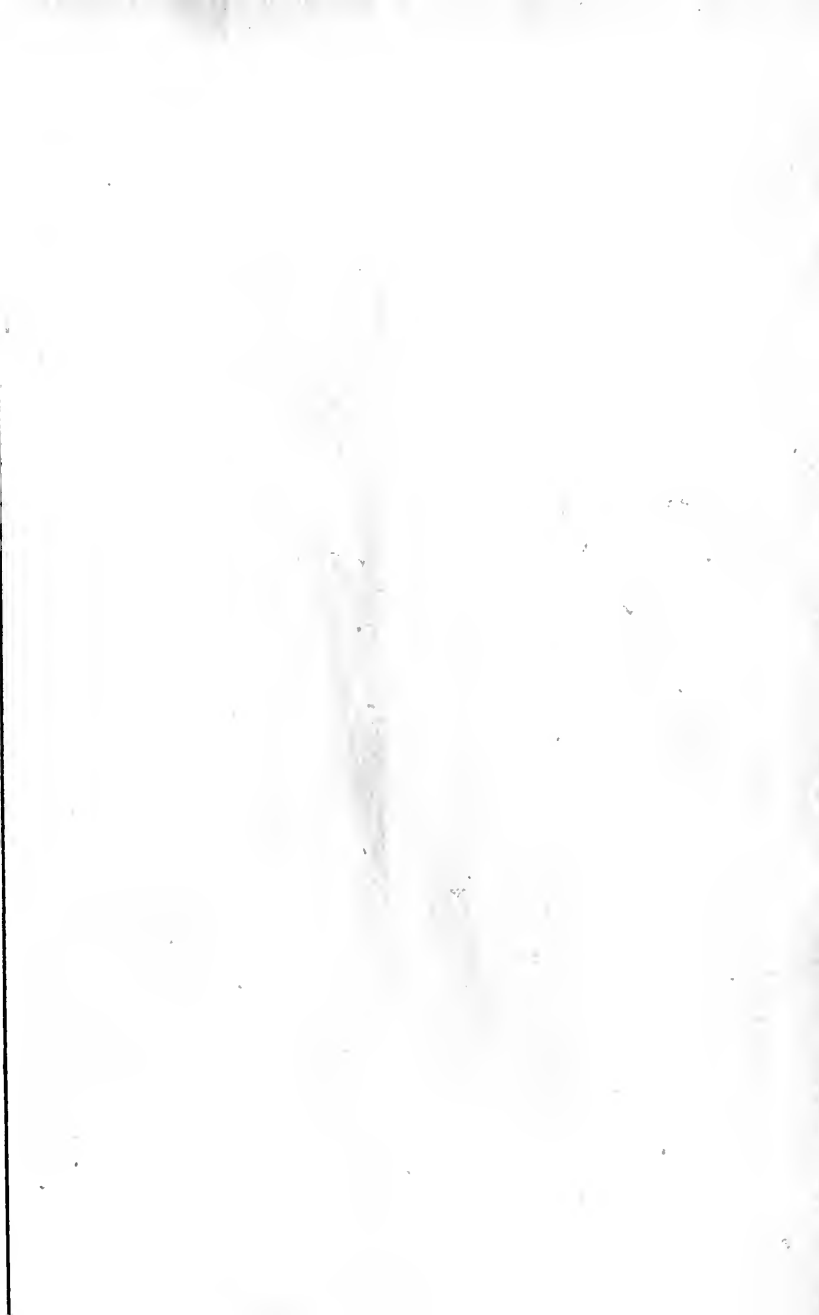
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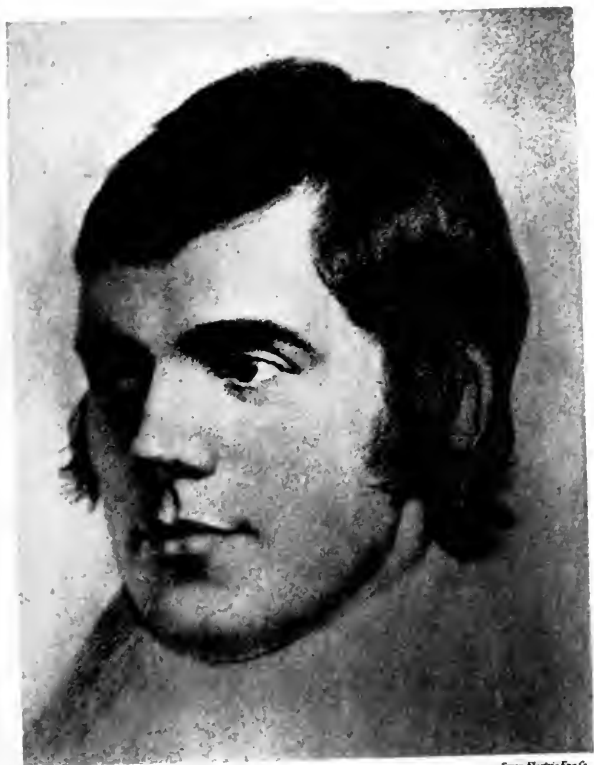


THE HERITAGE OF BURNS

*Thro' busiest street and loneliest glen  
Are felt the flashes of his pen :  
He rules, 'mid winter snows, and when  
    Bees fill their hives ;  
Deep in the genial heart of men  
    His power survives.*

—WORDSWORTH.





*Swan, Martin & Co*

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~~THE~~  
~~HERITAGE~~  
~~OF~~  
~~BURNS~~

THE  
HERITAGE OF BURNS

BY

WILLIAM ROBERTSON TURNBULL

*Ingenio stat*



*sine morte decus*

HADDINGTON:

347110  
23. 2. 38.

WILLIAM SINCLAIR, 63 MARKET STREET

1896

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PR  
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TO HARRIE ;—

‘What I have done is yours ; what I have to do is yours ; being part  
in all I have devoted yours.’



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## ERRATA.

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- Page 139, line 23 *for* presence *read* pressure.  
" 266, " 22 *for* moulded *read* mouldered.  
" 271, " 19 *for* lighty *read* lightly.

# THE HERITAGE OF BURNS.

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## CHAPTER I.

### IN PRAISE AND BLAME.

#### I.

**I**T is a far cry from Alloway to Arezzo. Four and a half centuries divide the birth-time of Burns from that of Petrarca. And yet the tradition which, in the general filiation of European poetry, connects the one with the other is not wholly fanciful. And this for reasons other than the common one that they are primarily and pre-eminently amatory poets. Strictly speaking, each is the antithesis of the other; they are as absolutely opposite in genius as in character; and the competent critic would as soon place a painter who has no religious feeling or reverence for grace and mystery, like Rubens, with Raphael, whose art is coherently and irrevocably religious, or Byron, the most earthly, with Shelley, the most spiritual of English poets,

as put in the same category the writer of the Epistles to Davie and Lapraik, and the author of the canzone addressed to the tribune Rienzi beginning "Spirto gentil che quelle membra reggi." Nevertheless their life and work reveal certain points of contact and affinity. Both were earnest lovers of liberty, devoted patriots, impassioned and persecuted poets who, with the divine devotion and self-less love that make men martyrs and makers, waged war with the conventions and cant of their age and gave a new impulse to the progress of the human intellect ; and, effectively interpreting the moral tumults of their epoch, literally *fought* their way to immortality. Another less obvious comparison is too tempting to be passed over. It is recorded that Petrarca was less desirous of the laurel crown for the honour, than for the hope of being protected by it from the persecuting thunder of the Tuscan priests. And there was a period of storm and stress in the short but agitated life of our own Burns during which some such protective distinction might have been thought necessary or desirable. Long before his day, however, Scotland had ceased to be an independent country. The courtly titles of the northern minstrel who had found a measure of protection from the patronage of the unfortunate House of Stuart, had passed away with other national honours and distinctions which, according to the poet's own plaint, had been "bought and sold for English gold." Beyond the admiration and tears of the Scottish peasantry—the

only signs of approval which he can be said to have really courted or coveted—there remained therefore in the Georgian era no higher external honour wherewith to mark the primacy of the poet who produced such lyrics as the incomparable and never-to-be-hackneyed war-ode of *Scots wha ha'e*, the *Song of Death*, and *Does haughty Gaul invasion threat*, than the laureateship of the battalion of Volunteers which was formed at Dumfries in the tempestuous spring of 1795—a post which scarcely offers more points for the imagination to exercise itself upon than the exciseman-ship with which the Crown saw fit at an earlier date to reward the fiery-hearted Tyrtæus of Scottish song.

It is more than likely that had a mode of laureation similar to that which obtained in the reign of James IV. been possible for Burns in the reign of George III., his pride would have proved a fatal stumbling-block to his own half-formed ambitions, of which we get a glimpse in the retrospective outleakings of an early epistle. Burns, like Béranger and Blake, was essentially a bard of democracy. But the democratic feeling for personality was more strongly marked in him than in them. Think of his sturdy independence and keen sense of bitterness under obligation, his strenuous confidence in the future of nations and his honest pride in the dignity of plain manhood, his disregard of artificial distinctions and deadly hatred of priestly domination. His only title was love of country ;

as for the rest,—to apply the self-defining words of the great French *chansonnier*,—he was confessedly *vilain et très vilain*. As a poet working only from the core of his own simple yet high-strung lyrical nature, it was not for him to sing of the gifts and graces of the great. His primary purpose was to insist upon the dignity of personal work and to paint the beauty and holiness of humble life; to breathe a miraculous breath of revelation over speechless souls and dull or dusky places in which hitherto no utterance had been; to cast a transfiguring light upon the simple affections, the humble occupations, the unaffected piety of the toiling poor who found in him the best organ for their suppressed feelings or inarticulate longings and desires.

Hence his lyrics are grand litanies of labour or songs of battle and of worship, like the hymns of the Huguenots and Covenanters, that tremble and cry with melodious emotion and piously celebrate deeds of love or dauntless valour. They all breathe an organic sentiment of absolute independence, an invincible resolution to do and bear alone; and the poet is always heard in them as the *voice* of the people, although he demonstrates his own singular and strongly-marked poetic individuality and makes the personal music of his own separate nature distinct to the ears of the world. The Radicalism of Burns runs through his tale of the *Two Dogs*: it forms the depressing

theme of his elegiac verses *Man was Made to Mourn* ; but its highest note is struck in that jubilant, aggressive, irresistible song of *A Man's a Man for a' that*, which distinctly formulates his democratic faith, and is worthy of its long inheritance of praise not only as a poem that reveals the incomparable fire and energy of his genius, but as a pregnant and potent document in the history of human freedom, like the American "Declaration of Independence" or the French "Rights of Man"—the sense in which it was quoted approvingly by Béranger in France, by Goethe in Germany, and by Emerson in America. Burns had very little property ; but he had a proud and indomitable spirit ; and the largeness and freedom and dignity of his nature are vividly revealed in these high-hearted lines :—

Though we hae little gear,  
We're fit to win our daily bread,  
As lang's we're hale and fier ;

or, in the stronger and still nobler sentiment which a keen sense of social oppression had wrung out of his suffering soul—

The rank is but the guinea's stamp,  
The man's the gowd for a' that.

That, indeed, is the note that rings with a plangent and far-reaching resonance through all his verse which is coloured by the time, but still in the main purely individual.

In a manly and modest way Burns, doomed to the drudgery of daily toil, could woo and win the patronage of Glencairn or Graham of Fintry whom he calls his "stay in worldly strife." But to what end? That his wife and weans might "hae brose and brats o' duddies;" not that the aspiring force of his own ardent nature, so ill-matched with the meanness of his opportunities, might have a freer vent, a more definite and pointed outcome. "Never did a heart pant more ardently than mine to be distinguished," is his own frank confession. But phrasing and praising, as we learn from the rhymed Note to Gavin Hamilton of 1786, were as repugnant to him as to Wordsworth, who at first declined the laurel because of its imposing such servile restraints upon his perfect independence. It was not by peer or patron that Burns was tutored into song. Poverty and pain and the pitiless might of necessity that encompassed his life, were the nursing mothers of his muse. And although his courtliness might astonish Dugald Stewart and delight the Duchess of Gordon when, fresh from the ploughlands of his native Ayrshire, he entered without perturbation the first circles of Edinburgh society, he was never exactly the model protégé that Patronage loves to lionise without stint. When, in his own phrase, he was thus "dragged into the glare of polite and learned observation," he remained undazzled by his new associations, almost unmoved by the condescending adulation he received. He could neither take advice nor accept



favours with that docility of intellect or that obsequiousness of manner which those who play Mæcenas are so apt to expect. His sturdy independence was altogether admirable, even granting that it occasionally degenerated into tactless arrogance. His conversation was brilliant and powerful and marked by a "wildly witty, rustic grace," albeit the amenities of social life were at times disturbed by his rampant self-assertion and the offensive slips of a bold and "raucle tongue;" for, if his voice could be fine and musical as Apollo's lute, it could also on occasion be noisy and coarse as any brazen trumpet. And, since he quickly perceived that fundamentally one rank was no better than another, that there was little difference between the bucks of Edinburgh and the boors of Ayrshire, it is just possible that the revels in the Change-house of Poesie Nancy were preferable to the elegant symposia prepared by his learned and refined entertainers of 1787 in the Scottish capital. Burns possessed, in a word, a bottom of plain sincerity that kept him substantially straight. At this period, indeed, his whole demeanour reminds one of Napoleon's expression when Göethe was introduced—"Voila un homme!"; he was palpably *the* man most unfitted by nature then in Scotland to be a mere phrasemonger at the court-end of the universe.

Standing remote from, or ungovernably restless under authority, the free channel of himself alone, his imperious irritable pride, even more than his inalienable humanity,

prevented him from appearing as mere official representative of any party or any polity. And yet unconsciously, or only half-consciously,—for, in spite of his perpetual self-assertion he inwardly shrank from crediting to the full his own shaping power and binding strength,—he became, in the piping times of Pitt taxation and Tory protection, the first representative democrat in Scottish art. The spirit of revolt against the formulated and the conventional entered as deeply into Burns as into Byron or Shelley. They were all rebels and levellers who spoke the dialect and upheld the doctrines of Rousseau. It is no doubt true that the representative of the Revolution in its pure ideal was Byron or Shelley, and not Burns. And yet the Scot was a far greater social force than either of his English successors, and his influence proved as penetrative and prolonged as theirs was shallow and short-lived. Originally Burns was royalist in his sympathies, and professed the same simple political creed as his forerunner Allan Ramsay, who was an anti-Unionist, like the youths of the Easy Club, of which he was an original member. His poetry contained expressions favourable to the Stuarts, mixed up with avowals of dislike to the Brunswick dynasty. But when the poetic fervours of Gallic Jacobinism seized hold of his imagination his convictions underwent a change; then he discovered with Enobarbus that “loyalty well held to fools doth make our faith mere folly.”

Burns, who had passed as a sort of Jacobite, though in reality a Whig, before his settlement in Dumfries, ardently participated in the prevailing feeling of the day which favoured the first assailants of the Bourbon despotism, without pausing, however, to consider the disastrous effects of Jacobin doctrine—the opposite, but not very distant extreme of Jacobitism—as evidenced in the final phases of the French Revolution. Himself a great historic force, the representative of the hopes and energies of renascent humanity, the poet in this epoch of transition and upheaval had only partially developed an historic sense. His spirit acted with the immediacy and intensity of passion; his strong egotism was more or less involved in all his emotional manifestations; and the rush and richness of his fancy deprived him of the ability to judge the relative proportion of political and moral things. Hence he showed an overweening confidence in the crude democratic notion that new and right growth naturally and necessarily follows upon demolition or decadence. With him humanity was the touchstone of divinity; and, even when he came to think and speak more sensibly on the subject of Jacobitism, this continued to be the central and animating thought of his fiery and rebellious strains. Simply to be born *a man*, not to be born a man of this or that rank or class or caste, was the essential thing that gave one the freedom of the world and the suffrages of mankind. This was a possession of which neither potentate, nor peer, nor priest

could rob him if he remained but true to himself; and naturally the consciousness of his own individual merit as man and poet alike made all external honours appear intrinsically meaningless and issueless.

For a' that, and a' that,  
 Their dignities and a' that,  
 The pith o' sense, and pride o' worth,  
 Are higher ranks than a' that.

Burns did not misknow himself, nor misapprehend the nature of his mission. If, as we have reason to infer from the poem of *The Vision*, he had early premonition of his potentiality, he was also quick to feel and foresee that it was not as a laureated scholar or salaried official of the Crown, but far otherwise, that God was to indemnify him for the troubles of his sordid lot. It was not for him to be a court-poet, like Chaucer or Dunbar, or a poet's poet, like Spenser or Shelley, or a philosopher's poet, like Shakespeare or Wordsworth. He was content to handle the rod of the gauger and measure ale firkins at Dumfries, to live as the uncrowned laureate of homely human nature—as the “folk-poet” God ordained to voice the essential passions and primitive thoughts of the race. His soul was not enslaved by hopes beyond his merits. Nor, whilst showing an honest pride in his own proper character and the strength and intensity of his poetic genius, did he conceal or lament the comparative narrowness of his range or the predestined limitations of his art-faculty. This

is made plain to us in many passages, but especially in the following stanza of the epistle to James Smith, one of his Mauchline cronies :—

Then farewell hopes o' laurel-boughs,  
To garland my poetic brows !  
Henceforth I'll rove where busy ploughs  
Are whistling thrang,  
And teach the lanely heights and howes  
My rustic sang.

One can conceive, however, that even Burns might have sought the shade and shelter of the crepuscular crown for reasons similar to those that swayed the Italian lyricist of the Middle Age, had the title of Rhymer of Scotland survived the era of Dunbar. For he too suffered from priestly bigotry and fanatical orthodoxy. He also felt "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune." As the poet of the New Light party in Ayrshire he had to contend, like the oldest of the Humanists, against the *aniles fabulae* of provincial precisians and the many-coloured cant of an anti-poetical party who, at a time when polemical divinity was, in his own words, "putting the country half-mad," strove in their blundering way to have "art made tongue-tied by authority." As Petrarca in his impassioned epistles thundered at the abuses of the Papal Court at Avignon, so Burns in his anti-Calvinistic satires fulminated against the hypocrisy and superstition of the Kirk at Mauchline. And both were successful in the crusade on which they entered with such fearless alacrity. If the poet of Arqua widened the range and reinforced the energies of Italian poetry,

he also did something, after the great Roman Revolution of 1347, to check clerical intolerance and diminish the number of ecclesiastical abuses. And if the poet of Mossgiel purified the national songs, he also effected the purification of the Church itself by claiming the right of public opinion to pronounce upon it when, a century and a half after the Covenant, he wrote such telling satires as *The Holy Fair* and *The Twa Herds*, or *The Kirk's Alarm* and *Holy Willie's Prayer*. Vices and virtues change in every age; and since Burns, in whose time hypocrisy ripened under the double breath of religion and morality, Holy Willies are as impossible as Tartuffes in France after Voltaire. But in each case a hue-and-cry of heresy was raised against the poet-reformer who thus strove to emancipate his fellows from X the trammels of traditionalism and priestcraft, and with savage impatience tore the phylacteries from the forehead of the Pharisee. And in the final issue of the struggle the one thing which specially differentiates the Italian from the Scottish singer is that, whilst Petrarca could seek and secure that protective patronage which shades and shelters the recipient from the rapturous inebriety of friends and the malignant fervour of enemies, Burns, after "his priest-skelping turns," was left alone and unprotected from the equally baneful influences of audacious idolatry and splenetic impatience. Luckily he was strong enough and sane enough to bear the passion-prompted praise and blame with calmness, or to "jouk beneath misfor-

tune's blows," and thus rhyme away with easy-minded candour :—

God knows, I'm no the thing I should be,  
 Nor am I even the thing I could be,  
 But twenty times I rather would be  
     An atheist clean,  
 Than under gospel colours hid be  
     Just for a screen.

But unhappily the twofold evil which pursued the poet through life has affected the whole current of Burns criticism for a hundred years. His fame has been alternately imperilled by the indiscriminate eulogy of ultra-deferential critics—those flatterers whom Chaucer calls “the Devil’s champions, that aye sing *Placebo*,” and of whom Mr Richard Le Gallienne is a typical and up-to-date example ; and the narrow-minded invective of puritanical zealots, like the not-to-be-named Dalkeith divine of 1859, who dwell upon the warp in his nature and the stain on his life, but show little knowledge of, or interest in, those eternal humanities that shine star-like in the highest air of poetry and shoot a lovely gleam of lyric light into every honest soul through the medium of such searching and incisive lines as these :—

Then gently sean your brother man,  
 Still gentler sister woman ;  
*Though they may gang a kennin' wrang,*  
*To step aside is human.*

Genius and morality are certainly not synonymous terms ; but then neither is the spirit of criticism the

spirit of religion. And from this circumstance Burns, like many men less gifted, has suffered grievously.

## II.

THE change of opinion which has taken place during the last half century is so striking that no critic of our poet can avoid discussing it, even at the risk of tediously repeating what is, in large measure, universally known. The merest tyro in art is very well aware that in a certain sense Burns, like Shakespeare, needs neither interpretation nor defence. Where we have such a man to honour, hero-worship is not a fantastic predilection, but becomes a sacred duty; the taste that is too fine to be captivated by his fancy is rightly regarded as superfine; the heart that is not touched to tears or laughter by his humour and his pathos is assuredly not made of "penetrable stuff;" and the person who fails in loyal worship of his greatness simply places himself beneath the level of ordinary human intelligence and is unworthy of notice. Yet there probably never will be a time in which sceptics will not take exception to Burns, and doubt his divinity, or make strenuous attempts to prune the luxuriance of imaginative reverence; and certainly at no time could it be affirmed with greater truth than now that the altered relation in which modern culture places the minds of all of us towards Burns, compels a reconsideration of



the grounds on which acceptance of him is required.

Nay more ; generations are arising who know not Burns. This is not to say that he goes unread ; I simply mean that the poet serves solely for a finish to their mental range, or a useful point at which to aim their rudimentary faculty of reverence, and that although his name, like the names of other great masters,—like Chaucer and Spenser, to mention but two, in a case where a profusion of examples is not called for,—is on all men's lips, their faith in him much resembles that of the world in its religion ;—it is nominal, but dead.\* And there is no sense or utility in shutting our eyes to the fact that there must always be a large section of the public which will attain its knowledge of him only at second-hand—vividly reflected through the warm appreciation of a Carlyle or a Wilson, or dimly shadowed forth through the utterances of the virgin-minded but misguided Currie, whose critical tests almost reduced the pearl of price to ashes, and yet left it, in his own judgment, a pearl still ; or the frosty matter-of-fact deliverances of Cromek, whose painstaking assiduity gave us a multitude of contradictory or discordant facts which in a measure destroyed impressiveness, and did away with all those acts of faith, those instinctive judgments and feelings, which are at once the essence of criticism and of life.

If we cannot accept everything in the fervid eulogium

\* See Ruskin *Modern Painters*, 2nd Preface, p. xxxix.

of Carlyle or the eloquent and manly defence of Wilson, still less is it possible for us to venerate the myth on which Currie experimented, or adore the man whom Cromek, not altogether consciously, has at least proved to be one. In the one case our perceptions are apt to be betrayed into error by the luminous atmosphere of romance with which enthusiasm has invested the sad strange story; in the other the loyalty of our inherited prepossessions is liable to be rudely disturbed by the vague surmises, the wild conjectures, the dogmatic assertions, since disproved, with which the narrative is overloaded, and by a rash method of dealing with disputable "facts" which alone reminds one of the regrettable "cock-sureness," the snip-snap style, and buoyant self-assertion of Macaulay. The sympathetic or remonstrant criticism which generalises or idealises, is characterised by that trusting ease or offhand confidence which inevitably leads to extravagance and illusion. The judicial or unimaginative criticism again which combats the encroachment of emotion and sentiment upon the domain of reason, certainly provides a more detailed statement of fact, and gives us that fuller knowledge which goes beyond the reach of faith and aims at scientific certainty, as if there had been enough of delay and extenuation; but unfortunately the statement, if elaborate and comprehensive, is not always accurate and just or safeguarded from appeal to more equitable tribunals, and the knowledge, if copious and suggestive, is occasionally

neither faultless nor acceptable since it helps to destroy those traditional beliefs by which our best critical appreciations are in all cases nourished and sustained. It really matters very little then whether Currie with his pedantries and confident plausible judgments of men and events, or Carlyle with his heart-melting pathos and emotion of commanding power, or Wilson with his solid sense and polemical dexterity, is the critic of our special predilection ; we find in the work of each and all much that is deeply interesting and of permanent value ; but in every instance we rise from its perusal more than ever persuaded of the fact that after all Burns is indubitably the best commentary of Burns.

And hence it is more than ever necessary for the critic of Burns who professes to be guided by that love of truth, that determination to penetrate to things as they are, which is the spring and principle of modern life and of the literature which best reflects it, to attempt the readjustment of the balance of criticism not so much by reference to authorities who command attention,—the very best of whom, as I have just hinted, have never quite grasped and reproduced the intellectual essence of the phenomena which they described or criticised,—but by a more direct and searching appeal to the man himself, by a more careful investigation of those accidental and secondary tendencies which overlay his primitive tendencies,—by which is meant the innate

and hereditary dispositions which he brought with him into the world,—and disturbed or confirmed the character of the Poet. Burns must, in other words, be viewed in relation to what are known as the three primordial forces of race, surroundings, and epoch;\* especially as a being who lived in instinctive or sympathetic connection with precursors and contemporaries the vital forces of whose life and work were essential to the effectuation of that potent and complex poetic organism we call Burns, the various phases in the destined evolution of which, from germ to growth, from efflorescence to decay and dissolution, it is the primary duty of the critic to trace and to exhibit.

It was by this principle that Heron was guided in the preparation of his *Memoir* of 1797. He applied the spirit of scientific investigation to those forces within and without which mould and model human thought. He paid attention to the permanent impulse of race, or the primitive tendencies of the individual man; he took note of the poet's surroundings, the physical and social circumstances which gave a bent and direction to his personal character; and he gauged the external pressure or acquired momentum of the age in which he lived—that hidden concord of creative forces brought about by the ever-changing movements of the nimbly-shifting *Zeit-Geist*,—better understood by French and German than by British criticism in Burns's day,—

\* See Taine *History of English Literature* I. p. 25.

which continually modifies men's tastes and manners, and shapes and regulates all literary production, as if there existed a subtle and sympathetic co-ordination between the powers of the human mind and the forces of the natural world. Heron expressly declares that his life of the poet was composed "on the principle that it is the proper business of the biographer to trace the gradual development of the character and talents of his hero, with all the changes which these undergo from the influence of external circumstances between the cradle and the grave." The thought is just, it is lucidly expressed, and it is moreover deserving of special attention from the budding and ubiquitous biographer who haunts the graveyards in the Victorian age. In spite of the evident crudeness of his methods and the fundamental inexactness of his measures, Heron comprehended how a critical biography should be written, and, all things considered, he did not fall very far short of his own ideal. He did not do, and, as first in the field, could not of course be expected to do, what Lockhart or Carlyle, Scott Douglas or Shairp accomplished in after years; viewed in connection with any one of these masters all other adventurers on this fertile field of criticism must bear, indeed, a more or less comic resemblance to the feeble-lighted ruck that followed Eclipse; but Heron, with single-hearted sincerity equal to theirs, was at least wise enough to pursue the only profitable course, which was not so much to tell a story as to decipher the man and his

nature, to pierce through all disguises and obstructions down to the deepest depths of character, and to invest his entire life-history with appropriate pathos and dignity.

The bulk of nineteenth-century criticism, however, has proceeded on lines quite different from those followed by the best critics of Burns between 1797 and 1828, the period embraced by the *Memoir* of Heron and Lockhart's monumental *Life*. This is especially true of the critical essays which have appeared during the last decennium. In the majority of these more attention has been paid to the ambiguities or mysteries of Burns's life, to his moral obliquities or episodical outrages upon decorum, than to the merits of his poems and the humanising influence which they still exert upon the hearts and minds of men. Criticism has not been directed to finding the man himself, or to explaining how it was possible for Burns to be what he was and to do what he did. It has not set itself to demonstrate the unity in variety of his poetic life, or determine what made him operative, what hampered him in action, and what, after all possible injuries of chance, all changes of time, all fluctuations of fashion, survives of him imperishable in the world of thoughts and things. Without discriminating adventitious circumstance or allowing for those seemingly inevitable accidents and retardations that have crippled the energies and marred the achievements of almost every lyrical poet from Herrick to Shelley, it has rather concentrated attention on specific

qualities mistakenly supposed to be "specially Scotch," and on the faults and foibles that either wrecked his life or made a partial failure of it.

In other words, admirers of his poetry appear to be persuaded that they lie under some obligation to be the champions of his conduct, while those who have diligently drawn from the hidden nooks and sunless crannies of his history an unsavoury knowledge of unseemly behaviour—those coarse orgies and repeated acts of incontinence which *may* give light to criticism, but only on its purely biographical side—cannot bear to think that from Burns proceeded a real evangel of Nature to all people. Shall we "gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles?" ask these purblind pessimists who have no notion of the hidden power of natural things, or who seem to forget that the literature which we possess of the highest class has never been produced by minds in the pure religious temper.\* The ardent disciple who has sufficient penetrative imagination to discern the "soul of goodness in things called evil," accepts him as a messenger of eternal truth sent forth and specially authorised by Providence to reform abuses, to quicken and reinforce society, and lead into the right way the erring sons of men. But the prurient moralist who strains or perverts facts to capricious or illegitimate uses cannot quite see, in this particular instance, how or why God chose the weak things of the world to confound

\* See Ruskin *Modern Painters* v. 205.

those that were mighty. Each type of critic keeps too absolutely to the circle of his own convictions ; and, but half able to recognise, and altogether unwilling to acknowledge, the merit of principles or the tendency of facts which are alien to his own, regards the other as his natural enemy. The effect produced by these critical antagonisms is precisely that foreshadowed by the Fury in *Prometheus* :—

The wise want love ; and those who love want wisdom ;  
And all best things are thus confused to ill.

Such details may, as I have indicated, have a biographical interest and value ; but they have absolutely nothing to do with criticism proper. Men, however, have in the past been as slow to perceive this as they are still slow to perceive that one by one the charges against his private life are being demonstrated to be gross exaggerations. Since 1796, when the poet perished in his prime, a countless host of biographers and commentators have had their fling or said their say about Burns. From philosopher Stewart to the last issue of the Tract Society men of different schools have laboured to adapt our national bard to their own tastes and capacities ; and facts, once supposed to be as fixed as the stars, have melted into fiction as one generation succeeded another. It is interesting—indeed few things in literary history are *more* interesting—to trace the inevitable flux and reflux of opinion, to note the ever-changing methods



practised among this rampant rout of partisan memoir-writers and rival critics. At one time we have had well-meant but, in the main, misdirected attempts to account for Burns, to explain him away, to reconcile his conduct with his verse which not only articulated what the nation was then struggling to express, but still wakes an echo in all but the very lowest intelligence and even creates a human heart where before no heart seemed to be. At another time we have had the truth, and oftentimes much more than the truth, presented with brutal austerity. By means of mouldy commonplaces malignity has magnified his actual misfortunes, accentuated the wild melodious follies of the farmer or the blasphemous bravado of the gauger in his cups; and, by wide-sweeping words of depreciation, besmirched the parts and graces of a bard born as truly to real and special use and service in the cause of God and Humanity as was ever a sacred poet like Dante or Milton or Wordsworth.

The lenient and exculpatory tone of the unfortunate Heron (1797) gave place to the superior and apologetic tone of the unfaithful Currie (1800); and the critical severities of Cromek (1808), or the shallow fault-finders of Walker (1811), were in turn modified by the charitable indulgence or discredited by the minuter researches of the loyal and enthusiastic Peterkin (1815). During the fifteen years which intervened between the publication of Currie's *Life* and Peterkin's *Review of*

*the Life of Burns*, the bulk of what was written about the poet was of a very ephemeral character, and, with the exceptions above noted, was originally intended for nothing more permanent than the festivals held in honour of his memory. Memoir after memoir of the life, and essay after essay on the works of Burns, appeared after the year of Waterloo. These were written by men of more or less repute, in the former of which categories stand out conspicuously Scott and Jeffrey who, like Byron and Wordsworth, rightly appreciated the man and wisely applauded his work. But it was only in the early years of the second quarter of the century that any definite and appropriate critical biography was produced. In 1828 Lockhart gave to the world his sympathetic and picturesque account of the Bard of Coila, which evoked the classical criticisms of Wilson and Carlyle, and, amongst other noticeable results, led to the publication in rapid succession of numerous biographies, written from various standpoints and with widely differing aims and talents, but all enriched more or less with notes of purest gold of criticism.

When Lockhart entered the field he could already number five or six biographies of the poet ; since then each decade has produced at least two contributions to this department of our literature, the most mark-worthy of which, it may be convenient to mention here, are the Lives of Cunningham (1834), of Hogg

and Motherwell (1835), of Chambers (1838 ; and, with much-needed revisions, 1851), of Alexander Smith (1865), of Principal Shairp (1879), of Charles Kent (1884), of W. M. Rossetti (1885), of Professor Blackie (1888), and, lastly, the searching if too polemical biographical work of Mr Scott Douglas (1877-79), and the masterly performance by Mr Wallace of this year, both of which have placed all admirers of Burns under great obligations. In rapidly reperusing these works for my present purpose I have not only discovered the amplest justification for the remark as to the capricious fluctuation of opinion and the swift and inexplicable transitions from praise to blame, but have been impressed with the idea that whilst there exist several valuable lives of Burns, there is not one pre-eminently good or unfailingly just ; not one book of which it can be said, as it can be fearlessly affirmed of Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, or Carlyle's *Life of Sterling*, or Trevelyan's *Life of Macaulay*, that it is *the* Life of Burns. More or less they are all contentious, sectional, one-sided : either too eruptive in admiration, or too aggressive in disapprobation, or overloaded with unreliable gossip, with anecdotes and reminiscences, which were never properly verified when verification was possible, but which still serve the purposes of that style of picturesque narrative which has been severely called " a kind of infinitely glorified newspaper reporting." Lockhart is probably less chargeable with these faults than any other of Burns's biographers or

editors till we meet with Rossetti and Scott Douglas, both of whom are deserving of praise for their unswerving straightforwardness and fidelity to fact ; but even Lockhart with all his clear vision and sound sense is not quite blameless. He honestly attempts to demonstrate the unity of the poet's work subject to the influences which made or marred it. He fastens with convincing power and sureness of grasp on the essential truth and beauty of his life and gives more insight into the true character of Burns than any previous biographer. He is just in his delineation of the man as far as he goes ; but he does not go far enough. Sympathetic and chivalrous to a fault in respecting the feelings of living persons, he erred, as the patronising and apologetic Currie erred in still graver matters, by relying too much on the benignant efficacies of concealment ; and, forgetting or ignoring the fact that a man "is explicable by nothing less than all his history," left untold much both of praise and blame, that he knew or surmised or had good warrant for believing to be either false or true.

In delineating the poet, Lockhart, it is true, "avoided the method of separate generalities, and rather sought for characteristic incidents, habits, actions, sayings ; in a word, for aspects which exhibit the whole man, as he looked and lived among his fellows."\* But even he, whilst more candid and

\* See Carlyle *Miscellanies* I. p. 196.

careful than Currie, more charitable and conciliating than Cromek, more anxious than Walker to give the resulting character of Burns as a living unity, rather than present a detached catalogue of the several virtues and vices which made up the "mingled yarn" of his life,—thus admitting the validity of Heron's position and realising the ideal he established in 1797,—did not show sufficient care in discarding or criticising stories to his hero's discredit; and, since all subsequent lives are not much more than amplifications or condensations of Lockhart's materials, one cannot help feeling that, had he done for Burns in 1828 what he did for Scott in 1836,—written a book once for all in a truly masterly manner,—fewer subsequent writers would have cared to handle the subject and fewer opportunities would have been afforded for angry debate and profitless cavil. In short, the problem of Burns's life was not adequately solved in 1828. The question was then left open by Lockhart, and remains a debatable point to this day, as to the effect produced by society on the poet, and the effect which he produced on society; or, as Carlyle phrases it, how co-existing circumstances modified him from without, and how he modified these from within.

Hence there has arisen a painful and profitless controversy, protracted beyond all parallel, between the polemical log-roller who talks unwisely of the spirit of the times, of the poet's warmth of passion, his

“inborn conviviality” and “rampant intellectuality,” and even upholds the fatal doctrine that the *genus irritabile vatum* hold a charter of exemption from the obligations of the divine law, and the puritanical bludgeoner who proceeds upon the equally fatuous assumption that the poet is altogether undeserving of admiration because of the coarseness and immorality that stain his whole life, and in some degree his works. The one allows his moral sense to be entirely warped by his idolatry for Burns: the other suffers his artistic perceptions to be wholly misled by the strength and pertinacity of his ethical convictions. On the one hand we have the votary—deferential, all-acquiescent, but pragmatical as Polonius—who indulges in inconsiderate and indefensible laudation, and seems at times to enjoy the fine flavour of his own phrases quite as much as the poetry which he so gratuitously defends. On the other hand we have the unctuous Chadbands and the pharisaical Pecksniffs of criticism who snivel sanctimoniously about the immoralities of Burns, and, mistaking violent judgments for grounded conviction, and inflated fictions for nourishing facts, use mouth-filling words to eke out the windy sentences of their effectless wrath.

And it very often happens that we have little to pick and choose between these rival critics of praise and blame. Indeed one feels at times as indisposed to be grateful to the tender and generous panegyrists

of the "awkward squad"—of whom Lowell thinks Burns was unappeasably apprehensive when he lay a-dying—who spread their butter artlessly with a shovel or offer us sweet stimulants that soothe or excite but do not nourish, as to those ruthless critics who use against the poet the petrific poleaxe or the mud grenade of libellous abuse,—the ever-handly weapons of offence with which the arsenal of the "rigidly righteous" is always so plentifully supplied. With one or two exceptions Burns has simply evoked a criticism of rejoinder and refutation. His life has either offered a spring-board, as it were, to the polemical agility of hot-headed enthusiasts who, related to truth through the emotions rather than through the sober calculations of history or probability, see no fault whatever in what they love, and have obviously but a slight knowledge even of the depths into which they unthinkingly plunge; or else it has furnished texts and examples to reformers out of work and to turgid moralists of equivocal taste who see in everything good the seed of evil and the weak spot in every great cause and aspiring nature. The heady enthusiast who rashly over-praises what he only partially understands, or the impenetrable dunce who shows an indolent reluctance to plumb the depths or scale the heights to which the poet sinks or soars, and yet flouts him for living continually in a world of "Scotch drink, Scotch religion, and Scotch manners," is as productive of mischief as any of those hateful Hams of criticism

who stand ready at a moment's notice to reform everything but themselves, and, with the intemperate zeal and ardour of a cloistered and untried virtue, wantonly defame Burns for the glory of God!

To praise or to blame him is not to know Burns. The essential man lies concealed far below his vices and his virtues which give us only a glimpse of him on the exterior or social side, and neither exhaust his nature nor make an errorless revelation of his inner constitution or the final phases of his ethical state. They are merely moral badges that proclaim the pernicious or profitable effect that he produced, or was likely to produce, upon public life; and do not furnish an explanatory chart of his whole life-course, or a comprehensive and infallible record of his moods and temperament, or a safe and reliable estimate of the magnitude and direction of those primitive passions by which he was swayed, and which in no case can ever find a just measurement in words. Approbation or disapprobation does not define Burns; and the names of good and bad, which at best are but monitory or advertising lights to warn or attract us, really tell us nothing of what he was or what he did. The sect of the Pharisees promises no doubt to be as immortal as the memory of Burns, and it seems inevitable that the bitterness and harshness of hate and scorn will long continue to mingle with the effusion and delicacy of reverence and of love. But,



whilst it is true that a man's works are not his books but his acts, and that the tree of knowledge must be estimated only by its fruits, it is no less true that the object of knowledge itself is not theory, but application. And surely, now that a century has passed since the chapter of his errors was completed, criticism, which professes to be scientific in its methods and rational in its aims; might be content to close the book and apply itself to the more profitable consideration of the faculties and the sentiments of Burns—their connection, their results, and their different degrees.

## III.

BUT when, disgusted with the sickening superabundance of iconoclastic personal criticism, we turn to the criticism which treats of Burns as primarily and pre-eminently poet, what do we find? Numerous symptoms, such as the recent controversy provoked by the rash and overstrained comments of Mr Le Gallienne, on the one hand, and some isolated specimens of retrograde criticism in the scholarly work of Mr Henley, on the other hand, show that we have not yet emerged from the party struggle that divided the critical world in the beginning of the century. The position in the history of English literature that will finally be assigned to Burns has *still* to be determined by the free conflict of opinion. And before suggesting

the lines on which such a question should be discussed or the means by which such a revolution of ideas is to be effected, I may perhaps be permitted briefly to review, by way of illustration, some of the most noteworthy critical judgments pronounced upon writers of kindred aims and tastes—promoters and leaders of human thought drawn close to each other by the upheaving of the first French Revolution and the wars of the Empire, and impelled by the democratic and philosophic sentiments of the modern era—during the hundred years that have passed since the death-day of Burns who, like them, supplies a forcible exemplification of the truth that all forms of thought and all objects of devotion are liable to perpetual revision.

Criticism is always to some extent the slave of fashion or the fool of fancy. Jeffrey thought the *Excursion* would not do, and even doubted of *Wilhelm Meister*: Coleridge denounced *Faust*; and Byron saw no merit in Spenser, preferred Tasso to Milton, thought Chaucer “obscene and contemptible,” and spoke of the old English dramatists as “mad and turbid mountebanks.” Scott’s novels have been called pantomimes, and Dickens’s pothouse pleasantries, and Pope’s *Essay on Criticism* a pert, insipid piece of commonplace. High critical authority has treated Keats’s *Endymion* as gratuitous nonsense; and Shelley’s *Prometheus* as drivelling prose run mad. In our own day Browning’s *Paracelsus* has been described as unintelligible; and

Tennyson's *In Memoriam* as mawkish and meaningless. With such native curiosities of criticism in mind, one can scarcely affect surprise at the opinion recently expressed with fantastical emphasis by the sapient Doctors of the Sorbonne who, bent on the complete and final pulverisation of Burns, sat for a week, secret and grave as an ecumenical council, discussing the claims of our poet, and at last declared that he was simply "a growth of a side-walk in literature," and that the poem *To a Mouse*, or the tale of *Tam o' Shanter* was trivial, or incurably *banal*.

The standard of excellence is constantly shifting. Writers once honoured as dispensers of wisdom and faithful interpreters of human life, are ruthlessly denounced as impostors and false prophets. The idols of an older generation are frequently displaced in favour of innovators once despised. We adore what our fathers burned, and burn what they adored; and, although the whirligig of time invariably brings in its revenges and the discarded potentates are allowed to resume their place and return to power, it is undeniable that our earthly reputations, as a great poet has observed, resemble the colour of the grass—the same sun that makes the green bleaches it again. Critical opinion, in a word, alternates periodically betwixt chivalrous devotion and cynical contempt; and of Voltaire and Rousseau, of Pope and Swift, of Byron and Shelley, concerning whom I desire to say

a word here for obvious reasons, this is especially true.

Historical parallels are proverbially misleading, and probably the contrast is more conspicuous than the resemblance between Burns and the writers named. Yet the analogy between what Voltaire or Swift or Byron did as protesting or revolutionary forces and the ever-fluctuating criticism which their life and work has evoked, and the equally daring and effective achievements of Burns which have been as recklessly overpraised or as stupidly maligned and misunderstood, is sufficiently close to be of use in aiding us to realise his true character and position as man and as poet, and, carefully differentiating between strong expressions and strong judgment, between violent phrases and grounded conviction, to determine finally the bases on which alone a sound and rational criticism can rest.

Everybody whose opinion has been worth recording for the last century has given some deliverance on all of these men; and their judgments have been about as diverse as there have been lips to utter them. A fervid Natural Theist like Carlyle, for instance, possessed by the poetic Puritan piety of his Presbyterian ancestors, looks with unmixed moral repugnance upon Voltaire who certainly struck valiant blows at obscurantist priestcraft but also attempted unhappily, with glib composure and demoniac perseverance, to compass the destruction of the Christian

religion by means of brilliant tragedies and essays, and epistles to Uranie. In his brilliant but inadequate essay on the philosopher of Ferney, Carlyle proclaims him, a year after the Burns essay, a lawless mocker or "light Pococurante;" a sophisticated "monster of impiety" destitute of all true heroism of character; an "ape-demon" and master of *persiflage* who sees but a little way into Nature and gives but a pitiful picture of human life. But Voltaire is the cynosure of enthusiasts like Grimm who listens unconcernedly to the recurrent and heart-piercing "*Ecrasez l'infâme!*" and speaks of him approvingly as the "Patriarch of the Holy Philosophical Church;" and to an eclectic, like Mr Morley, who has none of Carlyle's scornful indifference of modern dilettantism, he appears in 1872 as a universal source of light, a decided gain for pure human culture, "the very eye of modern illumination."

The critics of the schools, again, speak of Rousseau as a shallow trifler or sham ascetic with diseased susceptibilities; as a "hero of vanity" or spiritual hypochondriac; as a typical example of the sentimentalist of genius and the revolutionary destructive who, as Burke in a once-famous passage affirmed, showed benevolence to the whole species, and want of feeling for every individual with whom he came into contact. But poets like Victor Hugo and Lowell, who are democratic, but not exactly Godwin-perfectibility

men, like Shelley and Rousseau, regard the sombre and fanatical Genevese as the apostle of humanity, the greatest prophet of the eighteenth century who professed and felt deeply a faith in the goodness of God and of man ; as the true and fearless regenerator of politics and education who bore unsparing testimony against the established order of society which he viewed as an artificial structure, a divergence from nature, and strove to reconstitute on an ideal basis ; as the creator, in a word, of all that was noble and positive in the Revolutions of America and France, and the father of that modern democracy of which Burns and Blake and Béranger are the chief lyrical exponents.

And the same capricious fluctuation of critical opinion is noticeable in the history of the foremost literary figures of eighteenth-century England. Pope, the representative poet of the Classical Period, is, on the one hand, regarded simply as the peevish coryphæus of deism who took a strictly æsthetic view of morals and of politics ; or as a typical Tory-Catholic of George II.'s day, full of mean jealousies, degrading subterfuges, and party spite—a man of unscrupulous bitterness, unfeeling coarseness, and unbridled malignity, whose insatiable vanity made him employ, according to Aaron Hill, “ a certain bladdery swell of management ” instead of trustfully awaiting the sure recognition of his fine literary gifts, and whose all-dominating love of finesse and manœuvring inspired the oft-quoted

sarcasm that "he could not drink tea without a stratagem." Thackeray declares that he did "more than any man who ever lived to depreciate the literary calling" by establishing the Grub-Street tradition and fiercely lampooning his contemporaries in the hate-inspired satire of the *Dunciad*. Mr Leslie Stephen speaks of him as a victim of moral as well as physical disease. And Mr Andrew Lang, who has a constitutional tendency to "assaulting-and-battering," makes very short work of the sovran poet of the Augustan Age, and roughly affirms that Pope is no poet at all—a judgment for which the earlier criticism of Mr Matthew Arnold had paved the way. But this curious consensus of depreciation is not more singular than the criticism of rejoinder and refutation which it has inspired. Gray, it is true, at an early stage of his poetic career rejected the mode of Pope and adopted the more massive and sonorous verse-system of Dryden; but nevertheless he has left on record, in a letter to Walpole, (3 Feb. 1746) his opinion that Pope was one of the finest English writers and a man distinguished as much by his "humanity and goodness of heart," as by his "greatness of mind." Johnson scornfully asked, "Who is a poet if Pope is not?"; and Scott did not hesitate to call him "the true deacon of the craft." Byron loved him next to the Bible: "I have always regarded him," he says, "as the greatest name in our poetry," and, he adds, "depend upon it, the rest are barbarians."\* Craik

\* See Moore, *Byron's Works*; *Life* v. p. 150. Ravenna, May 3, 1821.

speaks of him as a poet of keen and sensitive nature, second in his own class only to Dryden, to whom we owe a rich inheritance of brilliant and melodious fancies. And Courthope affirms that he not only renewed, in the true spirit of his great ancestor Chaucer, the ancient spring of inspiration derived from national life and manners, but communicated to poetry an ethical impulse which has elevated the thought and language of the English race ; a dictum quite in the spirit of Mr Ruskin who in 1871 described Pope as the most perfect representative, since Chaucer, of the true English mind, whose "serene and just benevolence" in theology placed him two centuries in advance of his time.\*

To one class, again, at the head of which stand Tories like Johnson and De Quincey, and latitudinarians like Jeffrey and Macaulay—so that political animosity or religious orthodoxy cannot be assigned as the reason for critical antipathy—Swift, the strongest of English satirists, is "an apostate politician" or "a sceptical and ribald priest,"—a sort of gifted Judas,—who, contemplating the world and human life solely from the diabolic, the Yahooish, or the infra-human point of view, denies all beauty and all truth, and vents the hideous mockery and ruthless misanthropy of a nature made wretched by sorrow and hatred, not merely upon Whig

\* See Courthope *The Liberal Movement in English Literature* p. 61 ; and Ruskin *Oxford Lectures on Art* p. 69.



or Tory, Church or Dissent, like any common partisan, but against opposition and government, and all mankind with the brutal impartiality and rude imperiousness of Shakespeare's Timon who, given up to indignation and bitterness, to decrying and destroying, ignored all goodness, crushed out all love, debased and defiled whatever he hated, and was left at last in utter heartloneliness with no cause to cherish and no doctrine to uphold. But to another and equally influential class, at the head of which stands Voltaire who, in appreciation of his humour and aweless audacity, called him a *Rabelais perfectionné*, he is at once a persistently original artist, delicate in criticism, sagacious in statecraft, unrivalled for effective eloquence and analogical power, who wages war against cowardice and cant and scholastic conventionalisms with such subtle and persevering wit that peers and priests become like Gulliver among the giants in his hands. Nothing can withstand the assault of this merciless realist who fights against all parties with the impartiality and easy-mindedness of a condottiere. The *sæva indignatio* which embittered his life—a thing born of intractable pride and a savage egotism that delighted to shock conventional notions, rather than of any reasonable dissatisfaction with the existing social order—is forgotten or ignored with the passions and the miseries that inspired the immortal *Travels* or the anonymous *Tale of a Tub*, that satire on religious dissensions and the self-sufficiency of the

different Churches,—in spirit and purpose not unlike the first shafts of satire shot by Burns against the stricter Auld Light clergy of Ayrshire and generally in exposure of the religious pretence and Pharisæism of the Scottish sects,—which M. Taine has not inaptly described as “the satire of all science and all truth.”

Tender and indulgent critics like Scott and Craik and Gosse regard Swift as a deeply reflective, an actively benevolent, a fundamentally religious man. To others again he is “the great Irish patriot,” and the greatest original intellect in literature between Dryden and Wordsworth. In spite of his splenetic impatience, extravagance, and withering pleasantries, he has a remarkable vein of common sense in him, a rich fund of deep-probing and illuminating wisdom, of tenderness, compassion, and intense affection. He is essentially and passionately a lover of good things. If he unfolds in the “Voyage to the Country of the Houyhnhnms” a dreadful picture of the possibilities of human nature, he also presents a careful sketch of what he conceives to be an ideal society. Nay more, he is palpably on the side of purity and liberty and sanity; and he does much, according to such critics, to enforce the religious sentiments and perfect the ethical state of men; whilst, like Shakespeare and Milton, Burns and Byron, he reveals pre-eminently in his work the solid character and the positive mind of his race and age.\*

\* On this point see Lockhart *Life of Scott*, chapter xxvii.

Swift's precedence of all the other wits of the reign of Anne is matter of universal acknowledgment. That he is the dominant intellectual figure of the first, as Johnson was of the second, half of the Eighteenth Century, is also indisputable. Nevertheless he is inscrutable as he is great; and the mass of mankind can neither enjoy Swift nor comprehend the Swiftian differentia. If it were at all necessary it would be easy to explain at length the reason of this;—why he excites the repulsion of the many and inspires the impassioned worship only of the few. A single sentence, however, must here suffice. At haphazard I assign these as valid reasons;—that he cares less about teaching a truth than making an impression; that he addresses certain individuals—a cabal or coterie, a sect or party—rather than mankind in general; and, aiming at present success instead of the ultimate triumph of beauty and truth, he strives to stir up the passions and prejudices rather than to enlighten the minds of his fellows.

But it is otherwise with Byron and Shelley—in many respects the most affluent poets of that rich and splendid age which ushered in our own—with regard to whom a brief word now falls to be said. They are cosmopolitan poets who flood the whole Georgian heavens with the cometary splendours of their genius; men of wider range and larger sympathies and higher aims than Swift; and it is therefore less

easy to account for the caprices of criticism in their case. With the fire divine in their hearts and the light celestial in their eyes, rebellious and mistrustful yet aspiring and hopeful, they appeal to the universal passions of humanity with all the tragic earnestness or intense reality of English imagination ; and, with the profuse prodigality of unrivalled genius, clothe conventional miseries and triumphs, the actions and the destinies of men, in the royal robes of song. And yet Culture displeased, or only half-pleased, with their fluent and facile art as an abstract more intensely coloured than the diffuse facts of daily experience, represents the one as being ostentatiously indifferent to moral laws, who sits and sulks "in his self-exile, with a proud heart striving to persuade itself that it despises the entire created universe," whilst it conceives a bastard or second-hand Romanticism to eclipse the pure and original type begotten by Coleridge and Wordsworth ; and it speaks prettily but patronisingly of the other as "a beautiful but ineffectual angel, beating in the void his luminous wings in vain,"\* altogether powerless to escape from the sensuous-ideal mood of the impassioned and reflective lyrist, who has a weak hold on objective realities but a keen sense of the love and light and life of the spirit world, into the mood of the epic poet, the singer of real life and action, albeit the frail life of the poet of *Prometheus* burnt itself away in passionate striving after eternal

\* See Arnold *Essays in Criticism*, 2nd Series, 1888, p. 252.

truth. Culture condemns Byron and Shelley for showing themselves so bitterly republican in politics and morality, for judging of human life as if will and emotion were all in all, and for pushing their hatred of spiritual falsehood too far ; just as it sneers at Burns's propensity to Jacobitism, which was merely "by way of *vive la bagatelle*," as the poet himself confesses in a note to his song of *Strathallan's Lament*, or tip-tilts its academic nose at his partiality for a sordid and repulsive "world of Scotch drink," and, with puerile insolence and absurdity, condemns him for shooting shining shafts of Apollo against the Python of false Theology, or searing with Hudibrastic sarcasm the hollow hypocrisy of the society by which he was surrounded and infected in the early days at Mossgiel.

Byron and Shelley were primarily and pre-eminently poets of revolt, genii of destruction, outcasts of the creed-bound kirks, the entire forces of whose nature were habitually concentrated for effort and bent upon strife. With hearts resolutely Jacobin and minds impermeable to many of the kindlier and worthier influences of their age, they embodied and expressed,—more fully and fiercely than Coleridge or even Wordsworth ever did in "his salad days, when he was green in judgment" and most inclined to the glorification of revolutionary commonplace,—that hatred of authority which was widely spread in England long

before it convulsed society in France. Here then, if anywhere, one might expect to find, according to the special predilections of opposing schools, something like critical unanimity either of praise or of blame. But it is just here that we discover the greatest flux and reflux of contrasted opinion. Orthodox admirers create disharmony by startling transitions from key to key, and amongst dissenters there is a perplexing and provoking "dissidence of dissent."

Byron, even more than Shelley, may with special significance be called a brother poet of Burns. These two stand together in sad separation from other men as master-types of unbridled passion, strong will, and defiant independence. Powerfully biased by external circumstance, alternately the idol and the horror of their contemporaries, we discover in the life and the poetry of the peer and the peasant a strange note of pathetic accordance. Burns, it is true, in spite of his Holy Fairs and Ordinations, is absolutely frank and sincerely reverential; at worst his assaults upon the Church simply show that he prefers "a grain of mother wit to a peck of clerisy," and although he was at feud with the formal orthodoxy of his age he was true to the orthodoxy of the universal human heart, and consequently his discontent never ends in negation; but Byron is totally destitute of religious reverence, even of common practical seriousness, and yet his doubt and denial and derision are stamped with artificiality

or overlaid with the aimless trivialities of a spurious scepticism. As for instance in these lines—

There's no such thing as certainty, that's plain ;

\*            \*            \*            \*

So little do we know what we're about in

This world, I doubt if doubt itself be doubting ;—

or this again—

O Doubt ; if thou be'st Doubt, for which some take thee,  
But which I doubt extremely.

The sinister sentiments of *Don Juan*—the best example of his indomitable disposition to perpetual and objectless negation—are obviously less the expression of deep-rooted convictions sincerely held than theatrical properties wantonly used to startle and to shock, to mar and untune the softening influences of nature and religion in the hearts and minds of men. The life that is so vague and histrionic to Byron is a life of intense reality and infinite worth to Burns ; the one lacks what the other possesses—a spirit of faithful tenacity at the bottom of his mind which keeps him substantially straight in all spiritual matters. In the point of view then from which Byron and Burns regarded the subjects with which they dealt, and in the style in which they treated them, they are necessarily poles asunder ; and yet a remarkable connection is discoverable in the subjects to which both had affinity. And hence I take Byron rather

than Shelley as a final illustration of the fantastic fertility of conflicting comment in the criticism of the century.

As man, as thinker, and as artist Byron was completely out of harmony with Carlyle who failed to find any direct guidance in his muse, and indeed declared with emphasis that no genuine productive thought was ever revealed by him to mankind. But he commanded the homage of Mazzini who accepted him as the most cosmopolitan English poet of the century; an aristocrat in sentiment, but a democrat in opinion, who "led the genius of Britain on a pilgrimage throughout all Europe." Jeffrey condemned as immoral and pernicious in tendency the canker of misanthropy that lurked at the core of his riotous verse; and, forgetful of the fact that the subject of *Manfred*, which he was then (1822) reviewing, was the dominant *idea* of the age, just as the Conrads and Alps and Laras of other poems,—vengeful and melancholy rebels against the associative tendency of modern life,—expressed the restlessness and morbid introspection or sickly Werterism that constituted its *disease*, failed utterly to recognise the noble freedom and the genuine modernism of his poetic spirit. But Göethe who also perceived Byron's taint of worldliness, or "Empeiria" as he called it, and complained of his too passionate insurgence against the stern fatalities of existence, his fierce and futile assault on



the religious world, spoke of him continually as the typical poet of the modern era, "different from all the others, and for the most part, greater;" and, with some judicious caveats, Scott writes to the same effect. Ruskin again speaks disparagingly of his passionate lyrics and self-examining verse as sentimental rather than creative literature. Habitually rapid and slovenly, with less truth of perception and less delicacy of taste than Burns, and with little or nothing of that thirst after completeness which marks the consummate artist, Byron altogether fails to satisfy his subtlest sense of art; and Swinburne, the most oracular of Byronic heresiarchs, delivers himself of this splenetic dictum that, at his best, Crabbe, the father and Founder of the Radical School of poets,—he, observe, who in earlier days was described with singular felicity of epithet as "Pope in worsted stockings,"—is a tenfold more potent master than the author of the apocalyptic *Cain* and the cynical but melodious *Don Juan* which, if it be the most aweless and audacious embodiment of amorous irregularity in man, is also the fullest and most forceful expression of the spirit of the French Revolution in contemporary poetry. But authorities of a different type—notably, Castelar in Spain, Sainte Beuve in France, Elze in Germany, and Arnold, Morley, and Nichol in Britain,—regard Byron as something better than a sulky and desperate dandy or Beau Brummell with brains, and his poetry as

something worthier than an artfully prepared compound of dirt and deity. To them he is "the grand Napoleon of the realms of rhyme," strong to shatter and create; the supreme realist of English art in description and in feeling as in style, even although he brings too much real life into his self-delineative verse, and the higher poetic nature is occasionally expelled by a mode of thought that is essentially empiric.\* In life Byron's vogue, like that of Burns, was no doubt largely a personal vogue. But it seems to me that a reaction has set in in favour of his poetry viewed apart from the life of the man who gave birth to it. And this, in spite of the criticism of Carlyle and Ruskin and Swinburne, is precisely as it ought to be. Burns and Byron are the master-singers of Democracy to whom we all owe a debt of gratitude; and when we are unjust enough to forget it, may the Muse forget us!

#### IV.

Now whatever inadequacy or error there may be throughout in these materials and modes of demonstration, sufficient has at least been said to show, first, that impressions are most tenacious things—especially erroneous ones; secondly, that classifications of the kind indicated above are never friendly to true knowledge; thirdly, that whilst every criticism may

\* See *Conversations of Goethe*, Novr. 8, 1826, p. 175.

have started from a truth, most of them,—like the majority of theories about Burns,—have been partial and inadequate in their development; and, fourthly, that although the progress of events has now given each of the writers passed in review many eloquent and intelligent interpreters, not one of them has yet found—as Shakespeare or Bacon has found in the person of a Coleridge or a Spedding—that ideal critic who, having passed the unquiet stage of rash acceptance or violent refusal and entered upon the placid possession of respect for his merits and tolerance for his shortcomings, is competent to discover and declare with implacable and impeccable righteousness of insight and judgment, the essence and authority of truth and beauty, wherever they exist, or to discern and demonstrate with equal sagacity and rectitude the falsity or foulness of the artistic product criticised, the very presence of which qualities necessarily implies and presupposes the complete or partial misuse or desecration of the highest powers and properties of moral and intellectual life. Burns still wants his Coleridge or Spedding—a critic distinguished by that free and adequate positivity which accepts all things as parts of a natural or historic order.

1. When we come to consider him as purely and primarily poet, what do we find? The most cursory examination of the mass of criticism that has accumulated from Heron to Henley, will, I think,

furnish the reader with a complete verification of the forecited propositions. It is patent to everyone that impressions, both good and bad, concerning him have kept hold of men's minds with singular tenacity during the present century. No writer has been more *recklessly* badgered and belauded. Neither Voltaire nor Swift nor Byron—all rebels and levellers and haters of cant, like Burns ; all “ of the opposition,” as Byron said of himself—has occasioned greater schism in the schools of criticism, or fared worse from promiscuous and pointless adulation, on the one hand, or disingenuous impertinence and the fatuity of pedantic ignorance on the other. And in Shairp and Arnold and Henley we simply find more or less a repetition of the pedantries of Currie, or a recrudescence of the moralities of Cromek. The criticism of the last thirty years has not freed itself from the blinding and distorting elements of the first decades of the century.

2. It is equally certain that the classifications which have met with most favour are precisely those which have proved least serviceable in the promotion of a just and true knowledge of him. He has been praised eloquently and appreciated duly, it is true, by almost every great poet who has succeeded him. But when Byron says that “ Burns's rank is in the first class of his art ;” or when Campbell affirms that “ the impression of his genius is deep and universal, and, viewing

him merely as a poet, there is scarcely another regret connected with his name, than that his productions, with all their merit, fall short of the talents which he possessed ;” or when Scott declares with special emphasis that “no poet, with the exception of Shakespeare, ever possessed the power of exciting the most varied and discordant emotions with such rapid transitions,” what help, let me ask, is afforded us to reach either to the perfect comprehension or the better enjoyment of him? Such criticism is slightly vague to say the least of it. It is certainly not scientific. And when we leave the criticism that deals lavishly in laudatory assertions and appreciative generalities, and turn to the direct and austere criticism that claims the merit of intellectual precision and definiteness, and, by freely labelling the poet with privative or negative epithets, attempts to indicate or fix his moral temperament and mental attitude and his true use and function as artist, we too frequently discover that it amuses but does not instruct, that it neither saves us the trouble of thinking nor speaks a final word concerning him.

What possible benefit can one derive, for instance, from the romping heroics or spread-eagleism of Mr Le Gallienne who exalts this restless and struggling Titan,—he whom we see in perpetual strife with circumstance, suffering with the sorrows of all humanity, and continually smiting British conventionality with the

hammer of Thor,—to the serene and placid atmosphere of the great Olympians, and places him as an artist on an elevation with Shakespeare who, self-centred and solitary in his calm, *totus teres atque rotundus*, has a mind of such calibre and quality as to defy *all* comparison? Just about as much, perhaps, as we do from the cold, logical word-sifting of Mr Arnold or the critical daw-plucking of Mr Henley. Neither the dead nor the living critic has set himself to the task, it is true, of filching from Burns his good name. A certain callosity of heart and opacity of intellect, happily absent from their nature, is required for an enterprise so profitless and puerile. Yet each in his own way denies the merit of supreme poetic genius to Burns; and, in particular, it is idle to say of the chief editor of the Centenary Edition that he treats him with the critical respect that is due to a genius or a classic. Only an Englishman or an oxidised Scotchman would ever venture to make such a bare-faced affirmation, even in the pages of the *Pall Mall Gazette*. For Mr Henley does not hesitate to describe Burns, whose truth to Nature and knowledge of mankind the whole world has come to recognise by a kind of innate and unacquired sympathy, as simply, from first to last, a poet of undoubted primacy in a mere parochial corner of the universe. That is indisputably the practical outcome of his criticism. He invites us to accept this singer of majestic vision, who is the contemporary of every generation since his thought has largely helped to mould the character of the Scottish

people, and whose lyre has in the best sense built the walls of cities since he has given new force and energy to the idea of civic autonomy, as a peasant-poet of tuneful note and withering pleasantry whose sole destined use and function it was to satirise a parish or poetise the people of a province. Such criticisms as these are rash and overstrained, or presumptuous and pedantic. They do not inform or fix opinion. They simply provoke and unsettle. Sapless and unprocreant they naturally fail to enlarge the circle of study and reflection. Le Gallienne, who is purely and primarily a poet-rhetorician, dispenses entirely with reasoned discipline and system, and is ostentatiously illogical. Henley who is a learned, and aims at being a correct, critic, seems to miss the full swell and tide and energy of Burns's genius; and, as we shall presently see, in spite of his knowledge of rules and precedents in art, is defiantly inconsistent in his attempts to measure and master the aims and methods of the poet. The one does not see that he is lowering himself instead of exalting Burns; and the other fails to perceive that he is not damaging Burns's poetry, but his own critical reputation, by circumscribing the range of its influence.

We are thus left in this case also to find our way to Burns without the critic's prompting. For intellectual dimness is produced quite as much by the

fervid unveracity of the undisciplined enthusiast, as by the torpid unveracity of the cultured and calculating heretic, just as a luminous haze will as fatally confuse one's visual perceptions as the chilling density of a London fog. In the one case as in the other we shall be more likely indeed to reach an instructive appreciation of his poetry by at once discarding as equally false and futile the cynical theory that dwells with many-eyed minuteness on its moral perversities or superciliously treats Burns as a provincial poetaster, and the ultra-deferential theory, born of a broad and poetic temper of unreflecting idolatry, which can only lift Burns into a far-shining pre-eminence with the most popular poets of humanity, by flippantly dethroning Shelley or shamelessly converting Shakespeare, the greatest glory of our English tongue, into "a noble superstition." Critics who thus compare Burns with the greatest world-poet of all time, only remind me of the aweless audacity of certain craniologists who, in 1834, when the mausoleum at Dumfries was opened to admit the remains of the poet's widow, tried *their* hats on *his* skull, only to find them "all too little"; and the futile and childish attempt to confine within the narrow geographical bounds so airily defined by Mr Henley, one who is now regarded as a cosmopolitan poet by the verdict of the whole continental world of letters, recalls to mind the ineffectual attempt made by eighteenth-century coxcombs to vanquish Berkeley with a grin.



Nothing is to be gained by comparing the qualities of Burns with those of another poet of a perfectly distinct species. And if, on the other hand, it is true, as I believe it is, that the test of the standard rank of a singer is simply "his capacity for producing lasting pleasure by the metrical expression of thought, of whatever kind it may be,"\* Burns, who represents the supreme genius of his people, has as good a title to be considered a classical poet as Teniers,—the painter of low subjects and pastoral or rustic scenery,—has to be ranked among the masters of painting, destitute though he be of spiritual character and of spiritual thought.

3. And this leads me to observe that whilst each school of criticism finds a basis of fact-truth on which to rest its special theories, there is often observable a singular partiality or inadequacy of treatment. The reality and worth of Burns's poetry have been obscured hardly less by the zeal of friends, whose criticism is at best but the genuine record of a spontaneous impression, than by the malignity of enemies who show little or nothing of that accurate science of the thing criticised which alone gives abiding value to literary opinion. The praise is always generous; but is it always just? The blame is equally copious; but is it as coherent and discriminating? We have entered, it is true, on a riper period of poetic criticism: "another race hath

\* W. J. Courthope *The Liberal Movement in English Literature*, p. 31.

been and other palms are won;" but do we evince a sounder judgment or a saner and sincerer method of appraisement than Heron adopted in 1797 or Carlyle in 1828? No one really conversant with the development of literary opinion during the last half century will venture to answer these questions affirmatively. Even the most noteworthy criticism is either sectional and one-sided, or elaborately superficial.

How many critics of our poet perceive that beyond the limited truths embodied in particular poems there are deeper unfoldings awaiting the touch of Ithuriel's spear? All great art, remember, is obscure—not necessarily with metaphysical subtleties, as in the case of Browning, but with the mystery and vital movement of motive and feeling, as in the case of Burns. It seems very easy no doubt to understand such limpidly perfect poems as *Mary Morison* and *The Rigs o' Barley*, or *Green grow the Rashes, O*, and *Yestreen I had a Pint of Wine*. It seems hardly less easy to understand the farewell to Clarinda, the famous deathbed verses to Jessie Lewars, and the chaste and tender stanzas *To Mary in Heaven*. These are apparently quite simple productions expressive of the transports and despairs, of the immortality and all-conquering power of human love. Yet we never entirely comprehend them, any more than we do the simplest natural and elemental things—the unseen wind, the sounding sea, the quivering depths of azure air. We

return to them again and again ever finding something new to liberate our energies, to cheer us with fresh hopes, to soothe us with splendid vistas of the higher life :—

Time but th' impression stronger makes,  
As streams their channels deeper wear.

This is especially true perhaps of the piece last cited—that pious outpouring of inexpressible woe, peacefully sorrowful as the star-smitten shadows of the autumn night which saw its birth, in which Burns immortalized the low-born Highland lass with yellow hair and rosy cheeks and azure eyes whom he “loved long since, and lost awhile ;” the radiant and lovable Beatrice of his purest and most perfect passion, whose living and breathing beauty had set his soul on fire, and whose deathless spirit the poet, in a mood of grieved dejection yet triumphant vision, and standing even as Dante in the clear

Amorous silence of the swooning-sphere,

summoned out of the airy heavens to captivate all hearts.

That sacred hour can I forget ?  
Can I forget the hallow'd grove,  
Where by the winding Ayr we met,  
To live one day of parting love ?  
Eternity will not efface  
Those records dear of transports past ;  
Thy image at our last embrace ;  
Ah ! little thought we 'twas our last !

Death sanctifies many things, but it throws an especial

halo here by perpetuating, at its height of ardour, the relation of the faithful but ill-fated bard and the simple-hearted maiden of Argyle whom he loved as he loved no other woman, and whose untimely end he thus so tenderly deplores.

Burns chose the noblest fruit of his life for poetic expression in this pathetic elegy. And, surely, here if anywhere, we have depth enough and height enough of tragic beauty and passion to justify the remark that, as of old, out of the strong cometh forth sweetness, so the noblest æsthetic elevation is that which grows spontaneously out of the active powers of life well and wisely used; and that the utmost simplicity of expression may be united to the greatest profundity of conception. Simple in appearance, this poem is yet complex in fact. For, as Dante personifies his own better nature in Beatrice, so Burns, in his dark strivings, with two souls within one breast which will not be harmonised,—the one clinging with indomitable energy to the earth and earthly things, and the other with all its fine powers pointed and winged by purer living and loftier thinking, ever struggling to rise beyond the confines of this world into the illimitable—makes of Highland Mary a kind of outside conscience; at once a symbol of all virtue and a representation of his own higher nature.

The poetry of Burns is a living organism that

throbs with pulses and powers, and possesses the strength and variety and breathing truth of Nature herself. It is therefore inexhaustibly full of meaning. But like the sea and the sky it has pure abysses that baffle the eye and perplex the speculative intellect that is tempted to peer into its infinite and unresisting depths. It is not all *Duncan Gray* or *Tam Glen* with Burns. There are traces of a deeper element in his vision and criticism of life. The real man is not discovered to us when he sings, with ideal fervour and bacchanalian bravado, of Scotch drink,—the traditional *vin du pays*, misnamed in northern regions the water of life—in such a reckless strain as this:—

Leeze me on drink ! it gies us mair  
 Than either school or college ;  
 It kindles wit, it waukens lair,  
 It pangs us fou o' knowledge.  
 Be't whisky gill or penny wheep  
 Or ony stronger potion,  
 It never fails, on drinking deep,  
 To kittle up our notion  
 By night or day.

Nor is he to be estimated by the ironic and oft-repeated sentiment of "Whistle owre the lave o't," which is only Burns's way of expressing in sportive and convivial moments the *Carpe diem* and the *Vivas in amore jocosque* which form the animating and pervading spirit of Homer's hymns, of Anacreon's erotic odes, and the happy-hearted lyrics of Horace and Catullus. His own words are—

I live to-day as well's I may  
Regardless of to-morrow.

But he who would know the real man at his best must think of him as he mused in the starlight at Ellisland on Highland Mary; his eyes, dimmed with the dew of unshed tears, fixed steadily on the "lingering star" that, breathing peace and passion in its motion, shone with no meaningless rays of light but sweetly imaged the perfect loveliness of love and the summer light of all his purer life, whilst thoughts of the might-have-been surged sadly and gloomily in his bruised and bleeding heart that was foredoomed to know neither joy nor sorrow of a higher strain.

Poetry, however, is no creed of morality, no source of elevated personal sentiment that preserves from sin or shields from sorrow. Were it so the love and memory of Mary Campbell might have given a different character to the peculiar heritage of largeness and love which we owe to Burns, who in love sinned greatly, yet sang sweetly of love,—a legitimate, but, if you will, prodigal son of the eighteenth century—just as Heine and De Musset sinned and sang in later years. Hence when we seem most thoroughly to understand him, when, in a sense, we seize the spirit of the poet in his moments of purest light and ardour, we somehow feel that his nature is so fickle, elusive, and changeful, that even his *best* fails adequately to account for the whole body of his strangely-motivated verse. It is always

possible to represent his spirit in its ordinary and inferior manifestations ; it is also possible, but not easy, to represent it in its higher and more secret operations. His natural and moral powers must of course be grasped as these unfold themselves on the printed page ; in a sense, quite independently of the spirit of his time or the fictitious supports supplied by his predecessors. And yet, since there is always something obscure, something left undefined however much we may attempt to define his work, it is essential that the critic should view him in relation to his environment and in connection with the art of that earlier and ruder epoch which ushered in his own. Elements of race, country, parentage, and education, though powerful factors in its development, fail, it is true, to explain the mystery involved in pre-eminent poetical genius. Yet the historic position of Burns is an indispensable clue to many things in his teaching ; and, as it is obviously the fairest course to judge a man by the times he lived in and the rivals with whom he measured himself, one must even seek the source and origin of his religious sentiments, his poetical beauties, his practical truths, beyond contemporary dogmas and rules of art and local traditions collected by myth-breeding Curries and consolidated into something like definite opinion by moralists like Shairp.

Had criticism perseveringly pursued this course, had it consistently opposed the domination of the

historic estimate by the personal and truly fallacious estimate, or aimed at clear-sightedness as an essential pre-requisite to strict judgment, we would have had less reason to complain of national prejudice or ethical fanaticism or inadequacy of literary treatment in respect of what, after all proper deductions, is so well fitted to console, sustain, and charm us ; and, in a word, the *real* estimate of Burns's poetry would not have been so long forgotten or so hard to find. It would not have been so relentlessly boycotted by the Unco Guid, whose criticism is always moral, never psychological, and whose wordy pietism displays, as a rule, the utmost ignorance of the theological and ecclesiastical state of Scotland, and the actual circumstances which had made Scotsmen Protestant and Puritan and yet, amid the tug of rival interests and the ambitious hypocrisies of priests, provided a tempting mark for the shafts of the satirist.

Nor would it have been so unsparingly condemned on political grounds, had thorough-bred Tories, who believe in every antiquated error still extant, and regard every new departure or change of polity with the stolidity of a Megatherium, so that to them the poet still appears as an apostle of sedition, consented to trace the connection of his ideas and the necessity of his actions at the outbreak of the French Revolution when the old elements of political disaffection in Scotland were re-embodied in new shapes, and the



Jacobite of 1715,—the poet's grandfather and uncles were "out" in that year, whilst his father was suspected of having a share in the second Rebellion of 1745,—reappeared as a half-Jacobin in 1790 when Burns, animated by a primary impulse toward Whiggism, but also affected by various personal and local circumstances of a non-political character, became a keen partisan-worker in contested elections, and produced numerous political effusions, of which *The Five Carlins* is the best and most humorous specimen.\* A patriot-poet with the fiery and rebellious temperament of Burns could not well remain silent while Scotland was ruled despotically by the autocrat Dundas. In passing it may be pointed out that the old-fashioned Whiggery of Burns's day was something fundamentally different from anything since known to us under that name. It meant simply adherence to the principles of the Revolution of 1688; and the designation of Whig party which, in its original application, according to Bishop Burnet (*History of His Own Time*, 3rd ed. 1766, i. 59) was "one of our unhappy terms of distinction" for those who opposed the Court of the Stuarts, whether in Scotland or in England, meant in 1790 a body of men associated in Parliament to control the still preponderant power of the Crown. So that statesmen and writers of distinction who had Tory proclivities would not in Burns's time have hesitated to accept the title

\* See Lockhart *Life of Burns*, p. 176.

of Whig. Oxford and Pitt, we know, were both in alliance with that party at the commencement of their political careers. The theories of Bolingbroke were avowedly based on Whig principles. Swift continued a Whig of the Revolution settlement long after he had written his "Examiners;" and Pope's memorable denunciation of Walpole was written in the true spirit of eighteenth-century Whiggery.

And had certain critics, again, to whom the investigation of literary origins and relationships is obviously unacceptable, thought fit to calculate the play of his motives or the impact of the real obstacles with which he had to contend as an artist, they would perhaps have discovered as they traced the history of Scottish literature before Burns, that there was little reason for sneering at *his* poetry as insignificant, trivial, and devoid of culture. Nay, more, they might perchance have discovered that there was actually a *new* principle of life lying at the heart of such poems as those addressed *To a Mouse* or *To a Mountain Daisy*, or the inimitable tale of *The Twa Dogs*—written, it is true, from the peasant's point of view, yet the most piquant and powerful presentment of the old controversy between rich and poor in poetic literature — which scarcely justified them in exhibiting a kind of half-adoring contempt for the "raggit rural verse" of the Bard of Coila.

But the criticism which, starting from a germ of

fact-truth, has developed through invidious or partial treatment into widely-accepted theories about Burns and his poetry that are essentially false and foolish, may best be illustrated by two concrete examples.

Lord Jeffrey in a once famous review took occasion to speak of the undisciplined harshness and acrimony of Burns's invective ; and he attributed this violent coarseness to the poet's utter want of chivalry, which the unpolished or disrespectful general tone of his gallantries was said to betoken. According to this authority the radical blot in Burns's character, and the cardinal deformity of much of Burns's poetry, was his real or affected contempt for prudence, decency, and regularity, arising from an acknowledged belief "*in the dispensing power of genius* and social feeling in all matters of morality and common sense."\*

Now the competent critic must at once admit that for these statements there is some basis of truth. In some of his satires our poet *does* show a fierce and ungovernable anger. His epigrams and lampoons are remarkable for pregnant wit and inimitable vivacity ; but they are no less remarkable at times for an artless redundancy of profane expressions. There is also an indelicate fervour of passion displayed in his amatorious verses ; and occasionally he indulges a far too audacious retrospect over the past happiness of the lover who has

\* See Jeffrey *Contributions to the Edinburgh Review*, 1855, p. 425, *et seqq.* .

failed to put the curb of virtue upon his too impetuous desire. Burns, it may be said, has written with more passion and natural feeling, and sometimes with more purity of tone and elevation of thought, than any singer from Sappho and Catullus to Béranger and Elizabeth Browning; whilst it may be added in partial extenuation of his fault that the eroticism which is the note of much of Burns's verse is largely artificial, like the indecency of Dryden's plays, and that society at that epoch was lenient, if not lax, in matters of the passions. Nevertheless, all for love,—in a sense which far exceeds our robuster meaning,—is his perpetual motto. Indeed he might have said with Musset and Heine, "Love is my sin." In it all the powers of his heart and mind, imagination like the rest, find their concentration and employment. And hence instead of abasing himself with chivalrous devotion in the presence of one or other of his multifarious mistresses, Burns, who seems to think that rapturous osculation is the primary purpose of human lips, and that the mutual self-absorption of two beings, who find a somewhat monotonous heaven in each other's arms, is the one desirable thing in mortal life, habitually approaches the beauties of his love-lilts, the Nellies and Jeans, the Clarindas and Maries, on a footing of perfect equality and sometimes even with vehement familiarity. It is impossible to deny that "generally in love, and not unfrequently in liquor,"—as the case has been wittily but not too kindly put by

Professor Saintsbury,\*—the poetry of Burns gives ample evidence of carelessness of feeling and contempt for public opinion in respect of those violations of prudence and duty to which his passions at times impelled him, but which the fate-driven bard of *The Vision* himself dismisses with the transparent sophism that perchance “the light that led astray was light from Heaven.” This statement, be it observed in passing, recalls to mind the frank sensualism of the ultra-Humanists of the Renaissance and Reformation period,—the true prototypes and forerunners of Burns and Byron and Shelley, the ultra-Humanists of the Romantic Revival of the Georgian age,—who in ethics accepted the doctrine that the senses do no wrong, and in æsthetics held by the belief that the end of edification justified the plainest realism of presentment. This at once explains the undisguised indelicacy of the Elizabethan drama of Fletcher and Ford, the cynical filthiness and ironic morals of the Restoration playwrights, and the broad humour, the violent contrasts, the audacious ideas clothed in vivid language, which we find in *The Jolly Beggars* of Burns. His art, naturally and of necessity, has nothing of the pedantic humanism of the Renaissance; it has, however, the inventive waywardness, the aweless audacity, the pulsing energy of its glowing youth.

But to resume: There is nothing in Jeffrey’s critical

\* In his *History of Nineteenth Century Literature*, 1896, p. 10.

estimate, no fact dealt with and no opinion expressed, which in the least deprives Burns of his title to the rank of a great man and an original genius. The æsthetical effect of many passages is undeniably marred by satirical violence or material coarseness of imagination ; and his touch on questions of taste and conduct is often casuistical and insecure. But Burns is withal direct and manly ; and what is objectionable in tone might fairly be described as virility tending to vulgarity rather than to viciousness. He does not offend or debilitate the moral sense by dubious hints or “unfair attractions” deliberately designed to give to vice the semblance of virtue, and thus make it a thing of deadly interest to receptive minds, like Zola and Daudet and other concupiscent sentimentalists of modern French fiction. These writers continually outrage one’s sense of cleanliness and decency. But this cannot be said of Burns, if we leave out of account one or two grosser relapses from propriety and rectitude. And besides, if his adoration of love is sometimes too intensely voluptuous, too openly Ovidian, and the ideal world he frames too narrow, it is at the same time a pure love which he idolises at his best,—and that best is to be found in pure and beautiful lyrics like *Mary Morison* and *Of a’ the airts the wind can blaw*,—and a virtuous ideal which, according to his lights, he endeavours to set forth. This, I think, is put beyond question by the following stanza from the Epistle of May, 1786, addressed to Andrew Aiken :—

The sacred love o' weel-plac'd love,  
Luxuriantly indulge it ;  
But never tempt th' illicit rove,  
Though naething should divulge it :  
I waive the quantum o' the sin,  
'The hazard of concealing ;  
But, och ! it hardens a' within,  
And petrifies the feeling.

Jeffrey's well-balanced and appreciative critical estimate is dated January 1809. It states the case against Burns in a temperate and judicial manner. The praise and blame are administered without extravagance or excess. The facts dealt with are authentic ; the inferences drawn, if hostile sometimes, are not unfair ; and the eloquence, whether employed in defence or rebuke, is always genuine and never mere rhodomontade. The writer, in short, displays, on the one hand, nothing of that extra-literary bias of Whiggery and non-intervention which alienated Scott's sympathies from the *Edinburgh Review*, and, on the other, little of that insensibility to the finer strokes of poetry which characterised his later criticisms of Wordsworth, Keats, and Shelley. Jeffrey, whilst noting his aberrations from the path of rectitude, honestly attempted to convey the impression that in Burns we had not only a man endowed with rare and extraordinary gifts of genius and fancy, but a poet who was, to use his own words, "characterized by a charming facility, which gave a grace even to occasional rudeness." But unhappily the very facts

which the founder of the famous "Blue and Yellow" used in 1809 to make good his position, have since been coerced into a service less reputable.

Smug critics from the south have mocked the majesty of Burns's manhood and given a fantastic emphasis to the theories so temperately propounded by Jeffrey. According to them the great poet was a love-sick fool whose "thoughtless follies laid him low;" whose death was entirely due, in other words, to debauchery and want of common sense. His sorrows and sufferings were all of his own seeking; and with his own hands he heaped ashes on his head. The coarse acrimony of his satires; the rude imperiousness of his discourse; the reckless debauchery and libertinism of his life so luridly revealed in letters and lyrics; the fierce assaults which he made upon the Church and the existing social order—these, it was affirmed, in 1889, by an ex-professor of Oxford, were the things that caused, and indeed excused, the apathetic indifference with which the country regarded the death-stricken, man-forsaken poet struggling neglected and miserable in his "lonesome latter years" with penury and pain. So utterly sad a scene the world of letters has seldom witnessed. It is scarcely paralleled, certainly not surpassed, by the fate of Cervantes who is supposed to have wanted bread, or of Tasso who wrote sonnets in the dark because he could not purchase candle-light, or of Camoëns who



died begging on Lisbon streets, or of our own Spenser who languished out his life in misery, like Butler and Otway who also trod the thorny path which led to hopeless misery and death. But it is not with awe and sadness that this spectacle of solemn desolation, so well calculated to plead for Burns in all hearts forever is treated by pensioned pedants and fatuous fanatics. "Burns," said this lineal descendant of Mr Verdant Green, "did not suffer for his genius, but for his impertinence." Now, Jeffrey's dicta apart, everything that could be held, even by the most tortuous reasoner, to give the least plausibility to such a mendacious theory is recorded in Lockhart's *Life of Burns* (Ingram's edition, pp. 101-3, 106, 172, 180); and to these passages I refer the curious reader.

Burns's offence, it is averred, was impertinence. But one would like to ask this maimed parody of Currie and Cromek,—half Mentor, half Thersites,—what there is in the poetry of Burns, what there is even in the conduct of Burns, to justify such a cold-blooded piece of academic priggishness. Was it impertinent for one in his condition of life to make and publish a book of verse? The instant success of the little Kilmarnock volume of 1786—now among the rarissima of modern poetic rarities—is surely sufficient answer. Burns himself was neither conscious of impudence nor overweening pride when he wrote

these lines in the *Epistle to Lapraik* which are at once a confession and a prophecy :—

Your critic folk may cock their nose,  
 And say, " How can you e'er propose,  
 You, wha ken hardly verse frae prose,  
                   To mak' a sang !"  
 But, by your leaves, my learned foes,  
                   Ye're maybe wrang.

What's a' your jargon o' your schools,  
 Your Latin names for horns and stools ;  
 If honest nature made you fools,  
                   What sairs your grammars ?  
 Ye'd better taen up spades and shoofs,  
                   Or knappin-hammers.

A set o' dull, conceited hashes,  
 Confuse their brains in college classes !  
 They gang in stirks, and come out asses,  
                   Plain truth to speak ;  
 And syne they think to climb Parnassus  
                   By dint o' Greek !

Gie me ae spark o' nature's fire !  
 That's a' the learning I desire ;  
 Then though I drudge through dub and mire  
                   At pleugh or cart,  
 My muse, though hamely in attire,  
                   May touch the heart.

Let it be admitted, again, that during his visit to Edinburgh—then (1786) "attentive," as himself sang, to "modest merit's silent claim"—he expressed his opinions with more decision than politeness, was it, let me ask, an unpardonable offence to say of the Scottish literati who had suggested certain emendations

in the text of his poems, that these learned critics reminded him of some spinsters in his country "who spun their thread so fine that it was neither fit for weft nor woof?" There is nothing more objectionable in this, and in many other remarks of similar tone that might be cited, than there is in the ironic and independent epistle addressed by Johnson to Lord Chesterfield in which the rough lexicographer speaks his mind to the elegant diplomatist, or Burke's famous *Letter to a Noble Lord*, which is justly regarded as the most splendid repartee in the English language. Let it further be conceded that at times he was betrayed into certain acts of rudeness in society, was it, after all, a very heinous crime for a man to whom, as Carlyle has well and wittily said, "far subtler things than the doctrine of association had been of old familiar," to burst the metaphysical soap-bubbles of Alison, and tell that profound philosopher who had formulated his once-famous association theory, partly to subvert the one-sided doctrine that resolved Beauty into a single principle, and partly to rehabilitate the Platonic notion that it was evolved through the recognition of *mind* in the cosmos,\* that his whole theory of the association of ideas must be true because it was so absurd? Burns was no euphuist or lackey of fine phrases, and was it impertinent for him, a man of irritable pride who preferred "ae spark o' nature's fire" to "a' your jargon o' your schools," to be sarcastic

\* See Knight *Philosophy of the Beautiful*, Part ii., p. 41.

on the upper ranks of society, or declare that humanity should be measured by its manhood, and that a dapper lord or belted knight might, therefore, be nothing less than a mere "coof" in spite of "his riband, star, and a' that?" Burns could not, and would not, be a traitor to convictions which, deeply rooted in his nature, made him the strong-fibred creature that he was—a man of the most pronounced individuality who impressed that individuality upon others, and whose name and fame are destined to outlast all vicissitudes of time and circumstance. The fearless expression of wholesome sentiment, even where there is overmuch of the *brusquerie républicaine* in tone and terms, is not to be confounded with deliberate rudeness. It is no mere fanciful notion that affiliates Burns, the greatest Scottish personality of his time, with Knox, who had probably the most dominating nature of all Scotchmen. But the piercing emphasis of Knox, a Humanist from the head inwards, and the emphasis of Burns, a Humanist from the heart outwards, are quite different things. And the dogmatism of Samuel Johnson, essentially an individualist of egoistic type, is not to be confounded with the rude imperiousness or burning vehemence of Burns, who was distinctively an individualist who loved humanity with a selfless love. As the herald and harbinger of poetic naturalism he spoke straight out everything he had to say, and called things by their proper names; entirely unfettered by the narrowing spirit of formula, he gave his message unreservedly to the

world. And standing on the pinnacle of history and criticism, at a distance of a century; we are able not only to discover the reasons which made his message unpalatable to his censors, but to perceive that some of the very purest of his contemporaries who freely criticised social conduct and expressed novel views on religion, politics, and philosophy, were tarred with the same pitch.

Was it impertinent for the poet in his recognised and self-avowed character of reforming revolutionary to denounce the hypocrisy and superstition of the Church in the *Twa Herds* and *The Holy Fair*, or, as a rebel against the Calvinism of his country, to champion the cause of the Moderate party and hold up to everlasting ridicule the stern dogmatism of the gloomy and thin-blooded preachers who then dominated the pulpits of the south-west of Scotland, by means of that stinging satire called *The Kirk's Alarm*, which he flung like a bomb into the camp of the orthodox—

Holy Will, Holy Will,  
There was wit i' your skull,  
When ye pilfer'd the alms o' the poor ;  
The timmer is scant,  
When ye're taen for a saunt,  
Wha should swing in a rape for an hour.  
Calvin's sons, Calvin's sons,  
Seize your sp'ritual guns,  
Ammunition you never can need ;  
Your hearts are the stuff,  
Will be powther enough,  
And your skulls are storehouses o' lead.

Born in days when the Church had fallen short indeed of her high calling, Burns, though personally far from exemplifying by precept and practice the religious faith of that Church which he strove to purify, did incalculable service to the cause of humanity when he thus entered the domain of controversial theology; and,—to say nothing of the complete success of the assault which he made,—it would be as gross a misrepresentation to say that he was aimlessly impertinent in doing what he did, as it would be to lay his defections from rectitude at the door of the Moderates of the period whose primary desire was to mitigate the austerity of the Puritan religion, albeit the New Light or Rationalistic clergy of Ayrshire did much to stimulate into more active exercise the natural recklessness of his disposition, and by their milder doctrines even to awaken in his mind for a time, as Carlyle has suggested, doubts and scruples about religion itself—a not uncommon result perhaps of a too liberal and long-continued ridicule of hypocrisy and fanaticism. That they had a high ideal of the character of the ministry cannot be disputed. They cultivated the accomplishments which form the amenities of general society, and, differing from the Evangelical party, who carried their official reserve into their ordinary intercourse, countenanced all recreations, innocent in themselves, with the view of showing that the Gospel they preached was not a system of cheerless gloom. They

were not teachers of unsound doctrine, albeit many of them were influenced by the speculative spirit which the philosophical writings of Hume had awakened. They strove to enforce the Biblical ethic ; and if it can be said with truth that there were instances of defective teaching and defective living among the members of the Moderate school, it may fairly be retorted that Burns's satire of *Holy Willie's Prayer* had without doubt a foundation in fact—that the Evangelicals loudly proclaimed the doctrines of grace whilst their effect was shamefully overlooked as productive of Christian fruit. The Moderates probably deserve as much credit, indeed, for bringing about a reformation in the religious life of eighteenth-century Scotland as their "fighting man" Burns himself ; they broke the theological shackles in which men's minds were fettered ; but the words of the poet "proud of his name and country" are sung round the globe, whilst the words of the free-minded preacher are forgotten even in the land whose creed they helped to liberalise. Neither Luther nor Latimer nor Knox struck more telling blows against false theology than this censured and excommunicated singer. Whatever may be said, therefore, of Burns's satires both on individuals and institutions, it is certain that "impertinence" is not the proper word to apply to them. Humour shines in them all—now playful, now grim, but true humour all the same. Sometimes they were written in a reckless fashion, it is true, and he has left behind him lines that his fondest admirers read with regret.

But still they are manly and honest productions, aimed at things which were notoriously dishonest. They showed that goodness depended on something else than the holding orthodox opinions, and taught the lesson of religious toleration. Faulty they may be ; vicious and impertinent they assuredly are not. The ring of sincerity is in them all ; and in his satires, as truly as in any other of his poems, which represent real life, and teach as life teaches, neither less nor more, he is essentially on the side of truth and virtue, and of all that is real in our religion. With which remark, the ill-starred and inauspicious attempt of Oxford in 1889 to belittle the poetry of Burns, may conveniently be dismissed.

Strangely enough, however, it happens that my second example of the singular evolution of unsound and uncritical opinion from a germ of truth is also derived from Oxford. Within three years after the publication of the Edinburgh edition of his poems, a clear and discriminating, though brief and incidental criticism of Burns emanated from thence. The author was Thomas Munro of Magdalen College ; the volume in which it appeared was entitled *Essays on Various Subjects* with the date 1790 ; and one naturally wonders if by any chance the paragraph in which this desultory philosopher professes to discover in Burns " a rare union of great simplicity and great knowledge of human nature," ever caught the poet's eye.\*

\* The credit of unearthing this early notice of the poet is due to Mr Samuel Neil, of Edinburgh. See *Glasgow Herald*, 22nd January 1895.



It is quite certain that if this early appreciation of Burns ever caught the eye, it never influenced the judgment, of another and a greater Oxford critic who, ninety years after, carped and cavilled at the poetry of our Scottish Theocritus, and manifested an invincible dislike to the sordid and repulsive world which he has painted. Matthew Arnold did not look at Burns through the spectacles of Munro. His sympathies—if one is entitled to speak of the “sympathies” of a writer whose one self-avowed passion is impartiality—are more for Byron than for Burns, although Byron was no better man and Byron’s poetry has certainly not enjoyed so great a vogue; and he comes to the conclusion at the end of his essay on *The Study of Poetry* that there is little of the genuine simplicity and absolute sincerity of the great classics in these homespun tales and lyrics, and still less of that high seriousness and powerful application of ideas to life “under the conditions fixed by the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty,” which we discover in such gnomic world-poets as Dante and Shakespeare. Burns is with Chaucer, and not with them.

This view is challengeable, and I propose to offer a remark upon it later on. For the present suffice it to say that Arnold’s criticism when justly viewed is not so much iconoclastic as it is dangerous in tendency. This is what renders it so objectionable. When he treats this natural genius of world-wide

reputation *as specially Scotch*—just as Saintsbury does in his literary History of the present year—or at best as a political and religious propagandist immersed in provincial polemics and dominating rustic life by his withering pleasantries or coarse village personalities—thus anticipating the patronising and infelicitous theories of Henley—we dismiss the exaggerated estimate with the thought that its author is either debarred from appreciation by want of sympathy with the poet, or distracted by want of comprehension of the subjects selected by him for artistic handling. We are content to say that he allows his personal æstheticism to interfere with the free action of his artistic nature. But we are less patient when this dainty critic of an approved Atticism asserts that *as a whole* the art of Burns is in the two great essentials—a certain quality of expression, and a certain quality of subject—poetically unsound; that although confessedly a master of language, Burns's verse and phrase are not always moulded to the melodious suggestion of beauty, whilst in spite of his vigorous understanding his knowledge of human nature is so partial and restricted that his poetry becomes distinctively bacchanalian, yet of dubious quality as such from the accent of bravado and insincerity by which it is characterised. Arnold affirms that there is an all-dominating note of ideality in the Anacreontics of Burns. But what then? The question to be settled by the art-critic is not whether the thing criticised is genuine *as an expression of personal belief*. He has

rather to determine whether the thing is artistically perfect, whether it has the note of ecstasy which gives distinction to all bacchanalian poetry from Anacreon to Béranger.

He praises frankly enough it is true such pieces as *Tam o' Shanter* and the cantata of *The Jolly Beggars*. The latter, indeed, he regards as fairly eclipsing the famous scene in Auerbach's Cellar, of Goëthe's *Faust*, and only to be paralleled in respect of completeness and intensity by Aristophanes and Shakespeare. He also mentions with approval the address *To a Mouse*, and *Duncan Gray*, and *Auld Lang Syne*, which in his opinion reveal the genuine Burns. And, although he considers three-fourths of the *Farewell to Nancy* mere verbiage, he singles out the immortal quatrain commencing "Had we never loved sae kindly," as an instance of that profound and passionate melancholy which closely approaches the high seriousness of the great classics. So far good. The constraining spirit of Truth has made this an age fertile of Balaams; and in this particular reference Arnold is of the number of the prophets. In such examples Burns's view of the world and life "is large, free, shrewd, benignant,—truly poetic, therefore; and his manner of rendering what he sees is to match;"\* this is freely admitted;

\* See Arnold's General Introduction to *Ward's English Poets* I. p. xlv.

but, leaving these exceptional pieces out of sight, and taking Burns's work as an artistic whole, what is Arnold's final word concerning it? It is weak as a "criticism of life"—to use his own formula—ephemeral in interest, radically and incurably *banal*, and, at times, approaching perilously near the bestial. It is a poetry, in short, that deals "perpetually with Scotch drink, Scotch religion, and Scotch manners;"\* and the harsh and repulsive world which Burns thus opens up to view produces dislike and discomfort not merely because it *is* repulsive, but because the poet in depicting it betrays sentiments and passions that are obviously affected and unreal. He lacks, in short, according to this strain of criticism, the seriousness and sincerity, as well as the regularity, precision, and balance of the great classics.

Now just observe the inevitable result of this style of criticism, which proceeds in simple assurance of faith that a classic model must always be right. The most Gallicised of English writers, Arnold closely resembles in method, temper, and patient persuasiveness of style the great Sainte-Beuve. Naturally enough, therefore, his influence as a representative of the critical spirit in England has penetrated and been specially felt in France. But that influence has undoubtedly not made for good entirely. For it may with perfect propriety be said that he produced, or

\* *Ibid* p. xli.

helped to produce, directly or obliquely, that far-ranging enterprise of general censure of Burns which culminated in 1893 in the fantastic performance of certain Parisian critics who then made a "dead-set" against him. They discarded their own Taine, whose work shows a comprehensive knowledge of Scottish poetry surprising in a foreigner, and the earlier critic, M. de Wailly, who had written on Burns with extraordinary vigour and success, and virtually accepted the general views of Arnold, who thus provided a peg on which they could hang with smug self-satisfaction the most tasteless and illogical criticism that is known to me. Palpably speaking without qualification and without true culture, these Doctors of the Sorbonne repeated, or rather parodied, the Arnoldian dicta as to the insignificance, triviality, and lack of culture displayed in the works of our poet; and with unblushing effrontery added that at best Burns was "a literary curiosity, a growth of a side-walk in literature, a writer of songs little above the order of songs which one might hear in a *café chantant*." They too showed an academic distaste for a world of Scotch drink; and, not content with having described its creator as a mere tenth-rate poetaster, denounced him, with the authoritative brevity of the ancient oracles, as a drunkard and a debauchee whose whole life was spent in vulgar *liaisons* and coarse orgies.

Surely we have here the very *ne plus ultra* and climax

of pedantic fatuity. As if forsooth French poets from Villon to Verlaine had led the continent and temperate life of Saint Francis or Saint Bernard and never published their unsavoury longings and emotions in gratuitously indecent verse. As if the world knew nothing of Voltaire's equivocal relations with his divine Emily, or Alfred de Musset's intimacy with Georges Sand—an intimacy above all limits of law and purity—which broke his heart and shortened his days. As if, in a word, adorers of Rabelais and Molière and Mirabeau, with their concupiscence and medical nastiness, or of such modern impressionists as Zola and Daudet, who have bowed the knee in worship of "the great goddess Lubricity" and sought to emancipate us from all that is morally sane and sound, had much reason to blame Burns for his vulgar intrigues, to sneer at his overweening partiality for the beverage of his native land, or condemn his poetry for its brutality and indecency. The coarse convivialism and provincial naughtiness,—or, if you will, the hideous travesty of love that occasionally forms the leading principle of our lyrist's imaginative debauch,—which to the modern mind disfigures some parts of Burns's work, is neither so foul nor so pernicious as the new hedonism and grimy gospel of human life which one finds to-day in the decadent sex-problem novel of France and of England.

And even if some of his poems *were* woven through

and through with the images of impurity and the agitations of vice, no one seeking relief from the Ten Commandments and the worship of duty, would ever willingly turn from them to the works of Rabelais, in which we have the sewer-and-bagnio business of concupiscent art carried out to perfection, or to the hideously-beautiful *Rolla* of Musset whose powerful and passionate story is utterly untellable, or to the *Nana* of Zola, which is a typical "call-a-spade-a-spade novel" and one that certainly descends to the lowest depths of sensual passion. French artists strive to be elegant; and in spite of their over-refinement and cloying sweetness, they remain morbid and obscene. Burns aims at being simple and natural; and remains fleshly, but, in spite of his vivid energy and frankness of treatment, not corrupt. We turn in disgust and indignation from the gilded Lesbian bestialities and artfully-suggested Petronian abominations of the one; we can always pity and pardon the other for his lively irregularities, severely repented of and duly atoned for, when once we enter into the deep current of his poetic vigour and manly joy. It is the mere foppery of literature to suffer ourselves to be long detained by the sallies of levity or the moral ambiguities that are discoverable in Burns's verse. And hence the venomous view of these hypercritical professors of the University of Paris—an opinion rashly taken up, and arrogantly as well as ignorantly maintained—furnishes at once a striking illustration of

the three things which it was my purpose to bring out in this sub-section—first, the fallacy of the strictly personal estimate and the effrontery of critical incapacity that is usually evidenced by those who adopt it; secondly, the fantastic emphasis of nineteenth-century opinion generally concerning Burns and his poetry; and thirdly, the partial and inadequate development of theories that have admittedly started from a germ of fact-truth.

4. But now a brief word on the one point that remains for consideration here. We have seen that since his death, as during his life, opinion as to the place which Burns, the intellectual continuator of Dunbar and Lyndesay, should occupy in the great poetic hierarchy, has touched every possible extreme. Like Voltaire and Swift and Byron, he is one of those round whose name and fame and work, human opinion seems destined to rage in never-ending strife. Pre-eminently a fighter himself, it is perhaps not to be wondered at that he has become, like those just named, an object of passionate admiration, and of almost equally passionate dislike, to those who, from different standpoints, have discussed his life and works during the past century. It is one of the great peculiarities of the case, indeed, that the controversy to which his career as man and as poet has given rise is one in which whosoever speaks of him at all is almost constrained to take a part.



And this leads me to say that it is one of the most noteworthy points in past and present criticism of Burns that his declared enemies who pedantically narrow the range of his influence as a singer, or basely exaggerate the sins and shortcomings of his verse, very often do less damage than his professed friends who attempt to magnify his greatness by foolish and flatulent comparisons, or strive to extenuate into mere trifles those aberrations from the right path which himself so bitterly deplored, or speak too leniently of the prurient innuendoes, the flippant blasphemies, the cynical mockeries that give a hint of an impure presence, and which, without wishing that Burns should be Bowdlerised, one would gladly see expunged from the writings of a poet who,—in spite of such occasional breaches of decorum,—was undeniably the purifier of Scottish song, dappled though these peccant passages be with the splendid imagery of mortal pain and passion.

As there is a flattery more contemptuous than scorn, a commendation more insulting than insolence, so perhaps Burns suffers quite as much from the liberties and levities, the weak and wordy wilfulness, of the æsthetically presumptuous, as from the coarseness and crudity, the persistent and pointless denunciation of the perversely ignorant. As Morley's extravagant praise is probably as injurious to Voltaire as Carlyle's cynical contempt, so the over-admiration of uncom-

promising enthusiasts—as sure a sign of immaturity as wholesale depreciation—is as harmful to the reputation of Burns, and prevents the formation of a real estimate of his poetry, as truly as the dubious crotchets and complicated cobwebs of new-fangled thought for which we are indebted to soberer and more disciplined writers. The kind of Christian charity from which such writers suffer is a vice in itself. We feel that even greater injustice is done to Burns when a critic strikes a sharp crescendo of rhapsodical praise, than when a critic languidly applauds with civil leer or faintly sounds a half-tone in the critical gamut. When admirers complain fretfully of his neglected genius and proceed to canonize Burns, or exalt him to the loftiest station in the poetical Olympus above the greatest of all Anglo-Saxon poets, they simply challenge the counter-verdict. They force thoughtful and unbiased minds to recall the facts which plainly demonstrate the folly and futility of all such appraisements. The excess that displays itself in inconsiderate and indefensible laudation, in utter forgetfulness of the fact that every Achilles has a vulnerable heel, inevitably provokes the excess that avenges itself on the moral defects that marred his life and stained his work,\* in utter forgetfulness of the fact that the excellencies of his poetry far outnumber their blemishes, and that after every item has been set against his name

\* See Shairp's monograph on *Burns* (English Men of Letters Series) p. 189.

that envy or malice can suggest, he comes to us with an enormous balance at his credit.

To be overpraised in the effusion that comes after ample supping on Haggis floated in seas of Glenlivet by the assembled heads of pseudocritical societies such as the average Burns Club of the Scottish provinces with which we are all familiar, where men meet and lose individuality in that kind of fraternity beloved by Tam o' Shanter and his "drouthy crony," is not a whit less distasteful than to be rudely dispraised by morbid and malevolent fanatics, or "clapperclawed with the palms of the vulgar." And Burns, who was never so dull of ear or dense of faculty as to confound the cackle of literary pedants with the music of the spheres, might well turn in disgust from all such critics who thus mock his memory by mistaking excitability of brain for wholesome exercise of thought, like the majestic ghost depicted by the ancient poet in the Elysian fields, as averting its face on the approach of a faithless friend. We would have less of this kind of thing, and also less of that uncharity of heart and intellect which befouls the name of Burns with bitter jibe or pitying condescension or encomiums mixed with cruel and indelicate reproach, were critics of opposing schools to read and lay to heart the devout, the human, and poetical confession contained in these three stanzas of his *Bard's Epitaph*, composed ten years before he sank to rest, in premature gloom and lurid splendour,

in the Mill Vennel of Dumfries, which prove that in him at least humility co-existed with genius :—

Is there a man whose judgment clear,  
 Can others teach the course to steer,  
 Yet runs, himself, life's mad career,  
                     Wild as the wave ;  
 Here pause—and, through the starting tear,  
                     Survey this grave.

The poor Inhabitant below  
 Was quick to learn and wise to know,  
 And keenly felt the friendly glow,  
                     And softer flame,  
 But thoughtless follies laid him low,  
                     And stain'd his name !

Reader, attend—whether thy soul  
 Soars fancy's flights beyond the pole,  
 Or darkling grubs this earthly hole,  
                     In low pursuit ;  
 Know, prudent, cautious self-control  
                     Is wisdom's root.

## V.

BUT how few writers have practised in criticism that control which Burns, alluding to still graver matters, here celebrates as “wisdom's root?” The praise and blame have been bestowed unduly, according as the brighter or darker side of the poet's character has struck the individual mind ; or, as the case has been well put, “according to the mood in which it was contemplated, and according, too, to the writer's

habitual judgments of human life."\* Burns criticism, in short, has been largely a thing of mutual recrimination ; the product rather of popular prejudice or traditionary faith than of unbiased philosophic insight. It has done much to excite curiosity, but comparatively little to satisfy or even direct it. For the most part, as we have seen, it has been rich and inventive, rather than scientific and precise—more truly a spasmodic thing of wordy pietism and nebulous refinements, the creation of narrow-minded religionists and presumptuous sciolists, than of logical precision and finished clearness. And the grand reason why so many contemporary dissertations on Burns are barren of result is, that critics attempt to draw a strict line of demarcation between the inner and the outer qualities of the poet's work, which are of their very nature indivisible. They absurdly endeavour to separate æsthetic from scientific criticism, and busy themselves more with the letter of the text, with the technical shell of Burns's art, than with its informing spirit and tendency. From this quarter and from that, however, many *coloured rays* of priceless worth have sprung up ; and one is naturally tempted at the close of this long survey to ask if it is possible to effect a union of these arrowy and many-tinted radiations of the critical spirit, and so produce, as it were, the *lumen siccum* or dry pure light of Bacon's famous apothegm. Is it possible, in plainer speech, to find

\* See Professor Wilson, *Blackwood's Magazine*, May 1828.

an ideal critic who, standing midway between the extravagant assertions of high-strung enthusiasm, and the perverse negations of cold-blooded analytical criticism, is competent to reconcile all apparent contradictions and delineate the poet with unimpeachable accuracy and impressiveness?

It would be idle to deny that there is much in the present aspect of Burns literature not only deserving notice but deep consideration from all thinking men. During the past thirty years many honest attempts have been made by capable critics to determine the claims of Burns to hold a permanent and lofty station in the ideal and immortal kingdom of supreme creative art. And in this connection it is impossible to set aside such writers—to mention only a few prominent names—as Smith and Stevenson, Shairp and Service, Rossetti and Blackie, all of whom have produced monographs of fine critical and æsthetic quality. Nor can we overlook the labourers in this fruitful field who have already gathered and garnered in this centenary year the results of more recent research, the fresh thoughts and theories that have been continually springing up in new paths of criticism. The *corpus* of Burns essay-criticism which we have derived from these writers is in many respects admirable. And yet it does not require much further notice here. For it is at best but a partial revelation that has been vouchsafed even to Stevenson and Shairp and Rossetti. Not a dexterous Scaliger or keen-witted

Salmasius of them all has quite solved the riddle of this simplest yet subtlest of singers. And hence the student-lover of Burns eager for enlightenment and guidance is perforce obliged in the long run to turn from them to the old race of commentators whose time-honoured eminence they are not likely to disturb.

Of this class then three writers stand out prominently—Lockhart, Wilson, Carlyle. Taken together their essays, veined and weighted with massy gold of criticism, constitute an estimate of abiding power, and deserve the praise bestowed by Horace upon the writings of the Greeks whom he specially loved—*Nocturna versate manu, versate diurna*. Let it not be supposed, however, that these are altogether impeccable masters who speak the final word concerning Burns. Lockhart's critical biography is a piece of careful art, animated throughout by a singularly humane and benignant spirit. The unaffected simplicity of its style, the stringent pathos of its episodic passages, effectively inlaid like mosaics, and the fine tact displayed in summing up the life-story of the poet and illustrating the divine capacities and inborn defects of his literary character and genius, have not only given it a place apart in the Bibliography of Burns, but made it an indubitable third or fourth in order of merit among the first half dozen standard biographies of British authors. With such qualities it could not fail, and it has not failed, of its effect. But with Scott Douglas in mind,

who will venture to affirm that his narrative is one of unimpeachable accuracy? And, remembering the classical criticism which this very book has evoked, who will dare to assert that his estimate left nothing to be said? In addition to his talent for biography,—a natural gift,—Lockhart had the qualities of the ideal critic; his work is distinguished by a remarkable freedom from the distortions of romance or hero-worship; but with all his solid sense and temperance of judgment, and whilst faithfully adhering in the main to reality, he sometimes allowed his opinions to become infected with prejudice or tinged by bias. His narrative and criticism are coloured by an imagination which has received its unconscious prompting from his admiration of Burns.

And this applies with even greater force to Wilson who is perhaps the most militant of Burns's early expositors; a man eminently qualified for the task he undertook by reason of the strength and variety of his Scottish sympathies and recollections, and, not less, by that peculiar quality, somewhat pedantically called "dæmonic energy," which animates and vivifies every part of his writings whether in prose or verse. Few writers have been more successful in seizing upon, and unfolding into clearness, the character of Burns in its life and secret mechanism; and few have criticised his poetry with such eloquence and insight. His delineation of the poet is extremely beautiful and



impressive. His critical remarks on the several kinds of poetry are distinguished by a perfect understanding and feeling of Burns's many-sided genius. And yet his whole dissertation betrays the polemic, the special pleader, rather than the scientific critic or dispassionate expositor.

In criticism warmth, no doubt, is necessary ; and light coloured by the love and reverence of high-strung enthusiasm is not the less respirable for being picturesque. But it is open to remark that at times Wilson's fervour of feeling approaches perilously near the tropical heat of the mere controversialist, whilst he is often tempted to push the dubious and dangerous art of word-painting a little too far. His writing moreover is too much of a sort of personal exhibition of himself—all his caprices and whims and abounding animal spirits in vital play before you. In this self-revelation there is certainly much to admire : the qualities which call for special mention being elastic intelligence, persuasive rhetoric, and richness and breadth of judgment. But whilst his sympathies are catholic, he is deficient in certain matters of taste ; and, in spite of the extraordinary vivacity and never-failing charm of skilful narration, there is often observable a want of steadiness or continuity of thought. This crowning defect of his work arises from over-fluency and facility ; from his exuberant way of thinking, or habitual breathless eagerness in accumulating expressive words and

picturesque similitudes—"motion propagating, motion and life throwing off life," to use De Quincey's words, in one unending stream of eloquence that flames with the passion of poetry. Wilson is the most candid and convincing of Burns's apologists; and yet we feel (do we not?) that his burning and impassioned words of eulogy or exculpation resemble at times the brilliant but self-consuming arrows of Acastes that kindled with swiftness and took fire in their flight. His criticism is a vast improvement on the exactly-proportioned but colourless and jejune criticism of the past age; but it may be best described as generally vigorous and stimulating, rather than as in all respects exact and safe.

Lockhart with all his accidental perversions will continue to be read long after Shairp. And Wilson in spite of his exuberance and swift generalisations will survive the Henleys, and Le Galliennes of contemporary criticism. But it is in Carlyle rather than in them that we discover the more salient qualities of the ideal critic. Nowhere else do we find such cogency of logical reason, such pre-Raphaelite veracity of presentation, in alliance with such deep tenderness of heart, and a pathos that never by any chance or exception succumbs to the brineless gush of the flabby sentimentalist who hypothetically desolates himself and cooks up æsthetic sorrows to tickle the jaded literary palate. The one typical Scotchman

since the days of Burns and Scott who can be named in the same breath with them, he stands in an altogether fuller and stronger light than either of those with whom he is here associated. He is steadier and more consecutive than Wilson; even more disinterested and consistent than Lockhart. His essay has more enduring qualities; and the peculiar flavour of his genius will keep it alive, however much some of his facts and conclusions may be revised or advanced. No writer on Burns has ever shown such an admirable gift for presenting familiar facts in new lights, and drawing fresh conclusions from them; or for turning names into realities by breathing emotion into them, and conceiving what their ideas and purposes may have been.

Carlyle's essay was composed with an evidently peculiar interest in all the outward circumstances of Burns's life, which in many respects bore so striking a resemblance to his own that naturally enough many parts of it are suffused with a kind of fitful and sympathetic personalism.\* It is one of the first examples extant of that rare and happy conjuncture of the right man and the right place: at once a splendid monument of his keen practical spirit, and a perfect illustration of what may be termed his literary *flair*, or scent. Carlyle, as we now know from Froude's peccant and much-abused volumes, felt

\* See Froude *Life of Carlyle: First Forty Years*, ii. p. 30.

himself in many things another Burns, which helps to explain how he came to produce what by general consent is regarded as the most beautiful and perfect thing about Burns in the English language.

It would be a comparatively easy thing perhaps to pick holes even in a piece of work so "perspicuously planned" as this. A man of strong special affections, Carlyle bound himself to his heroes by indissoluble bonds of personal attachment. This is evident in the case of Cromwell, Mirabeau, and Frederick. It is still more apparent in the case of Burns on whose life and character he dwells with the same heart-moving tenderness and adoring reverence that distinguishes his word-portraits of his earliest and staunchest friends Irving and Sterling. And in each case the general impression is one of almost complete satisfaction. But it must not be forgotten that Carlyle had always a certain incapacity to take poetry merely on poetical grounds, and to decide whether or not it was bad or good on those grounds. Nay more, with perfect justice it may be said, as it has been said,\* that though himself a great practitioner and judge of literature, he was totally unfit to estimate poetry *from the point of view of form*. His vehemently contemptuous criticisms of Shelley, Keats, and Wordsworth may be cited as examples of this defect. And his estimate of Burns's poetry is in certain parts as

\* See Saintsbury *ut supra*, p. 237.

ludicrously inexact. As, for instance, when he affirms that his verses do not, according to strict critical language, deserve the name of Poems: "they are rhymed eloquence, rhymed pathos, rhymed sense," he says, "yet seldom essentially melodious, aerial, poetical." Truly a curious verdict on the Kilmarnock volume of 1786! Or when he describes the tale of *Tam o' Shanter* as "not so much a poem, as a piece of sparkling rhetoric" which "might have been written, all but quite as well, by a man who, in place of genius, had only possessed talent." This deliverance in respect of a poem in which reverence and sympathy for man in his primary relations and essential being are so powerfully and pictorially expressed, has always struck me as one of the most curious infelicities of modern criticism. Here Carlyle's vigorous genius sinks into an impotent tameness. For the moment at least the spirit of poetic analysis is not in him. His criticism touches the workmanship rather than the work. And yet by sheer force of solid sense and human sympathy he has, in spite of such critical vagaries, said better things about Burns than almost any other writer.

Exception might be taken again to certain of his views concerning the poet's religion and place in life, or his literary position and relation to pre-existing art. His origin and calling were not, as is throughout assumed, entirely adverse to Burns. Even if they had

been Carlyle makes a deal too much of them. The poverty and pain of his lowly lot were indubitably the procuring causes of that far-resonant lyrical utterance which has enriched the world. They did for him what no other rank and no other kind of training could have accomplished. Of kin with the Tassos and Ariostos and Shelleys who "learn in suffering what they teach in song," they made him the natural expositor of rustic life, the poet-prophet of the common people,—always the most numerous class of any in the land, and the universal basis of society.

Further, it is unsound and uncritical to say that Burns was without poetic models, or that the models accessible were of the meanest sort. No statement could be more gratuitous, more at variance with historical fact, as we shall see later on. Lockhart and Wilson have an accurate idea of the position which he occupies in the history of Scottish literature. But Carlyle's extravagant picture of him as one working in deepest obscurity, without help and without instruction, makes one disposed to doubt whether he had any direct first-hand knowledge of the poetry of Henryson, Dunbar, Douglas, and Montgomery, the early precursors of Burns, from whom he received many of those poetic forms which, by intellectual expertness greater than theirs, yet stimulated into active exercise by their example, he advanced to higher stages of excellence. These on examination will be

found to be as truly mimetic of the old *makers* as of Ramsay and Ferguson, his immediate forerunners.

But with all his definiteness of intellectual conception and optical clearness of representation, Carlyle, it seems to me, errs in a matter of much greater moment. Speaking broadly, he has made us acquainted, in the true spirit of scientific criticism, with the inward springs and relations of Burns's character, more than any other writer. But one naturally shrinks from accepting his dismaliſed account of the poet's religious creed. Indeed anyone who reads with care Burns's noble letter, written 25th February 1794, to his eccentric but faithful friend Alexander Cunningham, will be forced to admit that Carlyle's view is arbitrary and misleading. It may be true that the *Cottar's Saturday Night*,—the beautiful Biblical pastoral of the Book of Ruth in the terse idiom of the Scottish Lowlands,—describes the faith of the poet's father rather than his own. But it is a fervid heart-utterance of all-embracing love and faith and domestic devotion, and the deep beauty of the poem reflects, at least, the sincere and simple reverence for the old national piety that dwelt in his soul. It may be even true—I do not say it is, but let it for the moment be assumed—that his letters and poems taken in their entirety make a revelation of nothing distinctively Christian; nothing that reaches very far above or beyond the deism of the eighteenth century which, resting on the philosophy of Shaftesbury, was super-

ficially expounded by the freethinking Bolingbroke and embellished by the conventional poetry of the pantheistic Pope. But to say, as Carlyle says, that Burns lived habitually in darkness and the shadow of doubt with "no temple in his understanding;" or that at best his religion amounted to nothing more than an anxious wish or "great perhaps," like that of Rabelais, seems to me to be a wildly negative or a wofully incomplete theory.

Burns thought too much and saw too clearly to shelter himself in the vague deistic belief of Pope. His coherent positivity and habitual militancy of spirit precluded the very possibility of his sinking into the torpid inane of agnosticism, although in a sense it may be said that that was the logical outcome of the rationalistic theory of the time as evidenced in the teaching of the New Light party whose laureate he was. If the acceptance of the fundamental truths of natural religion and the recognition of the fact that there is a spiritual centre in man answering to a higher spiritual centre in the universe; if faith in God and a fixed belief in the indestructibility of the personal self; if reliance on the love and mercy and justice of an Eternal Father—the instinctive and vital realities of his imagination—with a passionate realization of the genuine primitive moralities of the human heart, be the attributes of a religious mind, then Burns, it seems to me, possesses it with a reality uncommon in the followers of any religion.



These then are a few of the points on which Carlyle leaves something to be desired. And yet when all is said that can be said against his views, his estimate as a whole is exceptionally just, and the general scope of his advice is sound. He may be said indeed to have given a new temper, if not exactly a new direction to the criticism of Burns. And although there may be traces of undue warmth and shades of coolness here and there in this essay of 1828, it is full of sense and stimulus, of charity and truth. It voices, in a word, the passionate love and tragic sorrow that fills the loyal heart of Scotland which has never slighted and never forgotten her patriot-poet whose pride and aim it was to give to the people from whose bosom he sprang a deeper insight into the "wonder and bloom of the world," and a simpler yet stronger revelation of the greatness and goodness of human life. Let me give as a specimen those closing words, than which none fitter could be found in the whole range of Burns literature to conclude this long survey of the century's criticism in praise and blame :—

Byron and Burns were sent forth as missionaries to their generation, to teach it a higher doctrine, a purer truth ; they had a message to deliver, which left them no rest till it was accomplished ; in dim throes of pain, this divine behest lay smouldering within them ; for they knew not what it meant, and felt it only in mysterious anticipation, and they had to die without articulately uttering it. . . . We confess, it is not without a certain mournful awe that we view the fate of these noble souls, so richly gifted, yet ruined to so little purpose with all their gifts.

. . . . Byron and Burns could not live as idol-priests, but the fire of their own hearts consumed them ; and better it was for them that they could not. For it is not in the favour of the great or of the small, but in a life of truth, and in the inexpugnable citadel of his own soul, that a Byron's or a Burns's strength must lie. Let the great stand aloof from him, or know how to reverence him : he cannot be their menial, he cannot even be their partisan. . . . The world is habitually unjust in its judgments of such men ; unjust on many grounds, of which this one may be stated as the substance : It decides like a court of law, by dead statutes ; and not positively but negatively, less on what is done right, than on what is or is not done wrong. Not the few inches of deflection from the mathematical orbit, which are so easily measured, but the *ratio* of these to the whole diameter, constitutes the real aberration. This orbit may be a planet's, its diameter the breadth of the solar system ; or it may be a city hippodrome ; nay the circle of a ginhorse, its diameter a score of feet or paces. But the inches of deflection only are measured ; and it is assumed that the diameter of the ginhorse, and that of the planet, will yield the same *ratio* when compared with them ! Here lies the root of many a blind, cruel condemnation of Burnses, Swifts, Rousseaus, which one never listens to with approval. Granted, the ship comes into harbour with shrouds and tackle damaged ; the pilot is blameworthy ; he has not been all-wise and all-powerful ; but to know *how* blameworthy, tell us first whether his voyage has been round the Globe, or only to Ramsgate and the Isle of Dogs.

## CHAPTER II.

### POLITICS AND POETRY OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY.

#### I.

THE preliminary survey just concluded has established the fact that we have had for a century a singularly vacillating current of vague critical impression concerning Burns, perpetually liable to change, and continually agitated by infectious passion of praise or blame. And too often, as I have striven to show, the praise has been but an outpouring of tumid fervour, and the blame but an outcome of that invidious spirit which asserts itself in vague contemptuous negation. Even the specimens given in the preceding pages of what is known as the higher criticism have been proved to proceed entirely from persons who consider nothing right which is not based on the conventional principles of the great classics, and nothing true which has more of nature in it than of Dante or Shakespeare. Critics have not told us whether a thing is right or not ; they have told us rather whether it is like something else or not. In short, even the best of them have failed in large measure to distinguish that which is

really exalted and valuable in the modern school of poetry of which Burns is the great exemplar, and which ought to involve no more reference to the authority of past models or the personal character of the poet than a demonstration in Euclid. A man's attitude towards Burns is never properly determined by mere opinions about him. It is a matter of the heart, of natural disposition ; and his poetry is to be judged by principles of general truth and not by particular precedents. In a sense his work is above all animadversion, and beyond all praise. It is the record of a great mind, the outpouring of a passionate soul, in active sympathy with its age ; and we are not to approach it to be pleased only, but to be taught ; not to form a judgment merely, but to receive a lesson. As Burns followed out his own thoughts and intents of heart without reference to any human authority, so the work which embodies and reveals these is in a certain sense to be judged without reference to the form and spirit of artistic products of a different species.

One of the chief lessons to be drawn from the preceding inquiry is that the primary and paramount duty of the critic consists in separating the transient and accidental from the permanent and essential elements in the life and work of a great poet. An attempt must be made in a just temper of mind to estimate the true and distinctive relations of the

subject which criticism treats. And with this object in view the student-interpreter of Burns is naturally led to ask some questions of more special import than those which concerned us in the previous chapter. What, for instance, were the causes of his eminent success? To what extent did his poetry, which shows such active sympathy with the everyday debate of the world, embody the spirit of the eighteenth century in Scotland? What formative influence has it exercised over the national literature by its intense practicalness, its social intention, its mastering passion for nature, its single-eyed appreciation of her unnumbered moods of beauty and of terror—to mention but a few of the most salient and distinctive marks of the truly modern spirit? What place shall we assign to it as an adequate system of life and an inspiring social faith on the list of those lastingly important products of the human genius which, by virtue of their universality of appeal or their vividness and reality of attraction, resemble the more than mortal beauty of Helen of Argos that is said to have had a universal quality so that everyone felt related to it?

These are the weighty questions which naturally belong to the subject of the present study—questions infinitely more grave and fruitful of result than the mere settling of dates or dubious readings. And fortunately the conditions which render a well-ordered

inquiry of this nature possible were sufficiently realised in the history of Scottish poetry during the period of nearly four centuries by which such æsthetic creations of medieval ingenuity as the "soothfast" metrical history of *The Bruce* by Barbour (1316-1396) which, in spite of its quaint literalism, is rich in spontaneous and natural effects and rhythmical sweetness and harmony, were divided from the vivid and vigorous work of Burns which marks the dawn of the new era of creative and naturalistic art. To some of these questions I gave a partial answer when I tried incidentally to show our poet's close dependence on the spirit of his age. To others an answer falls to be made with greater appropriateness in another division of my book. And therefore for the present our attention may be confined to the consideration of the several contributory causes which, apart from the fertility and depth of his natural gifts, raised Burns into far-shining pre-eminence among the poets of the modern era.

## II

IN such a case the chief object of criticism is to bring into as clear a light as possible the characteristics of a poet in whose short life energy and ambition were devouringly predominant. It has, however, as secondary yet important objects, to settle the question

of how he was formed, to trace how far he was influenced by his literary predecessors and contemporaries, and show in what way and to what extent his work bears the stamp of his race and his social surroundings. In other words, sound and serviceable criticism whilst aiming primarily at the discovery of the soul or spiritual existence by which the material structure or body of his verse in its movements and phases is informed with significance and rational life, will also endeavour to demonstrate what the poet has by distinction and what he has in common with others, and to illustrate the traits and tendencies of his race through a thorough study of those characteristics which are of the essence of the poet's own being and are manifested in all the outcomes of his life and his art.

When vitalised by a true historic sense criticism will not content itself with merely noting the *summa genera* of human greatness in a given epoch, or distinguishing the most powerful currents in the several contributory streams that make up the one great world-river of human thought. It will endeavour to analyze—not perfectly, of course (for that is impossible), but proximately—the springs of those great actions and achievements which impress peculiar and necessary features on successive ages of culture, and observe with scrupulous nicety the genesis of an idea evolved and elaborated by kindred and

competing thinkers till it attains in the national literature the internal coherence of a real and spiritual unity.

History, be it observed, is not simply a quantum of facts and observations. Its essence does not lie in laws and battle-fields, but in the tide of thought and action, in the rush and surge of contending multitudes. Neither is Criticism solely and entirely a series of literary impressions and appreciations. Its essence does not lie in questions concerning the qualities of diction, the coherence of metaphors, or the fitness and congruity of sentiments, but in the elucidation of character, in the discovery and delineation of the peculiar nature of the poet from his art, and, in a word, in the revivifying power which brings back from deepest concealment and presents with scientific precision the life and meaning of half-forgotten things. History relates occurrences ; but it also conjectures probabilities of such. And Criticism is similarly thought and art in one. Both are as much concerned as Science with external facts. Both depend on exact knowledge, and the same minute, impartial observation and analysis of particulars. It is the function of the historian to trace the growth of states and their development. And it is the no less important and interesting function of the critic to trace how the poet's mind "orbed into the perfect star," and developed in all its gifts and powers. We



must not forget that intellectual facts have their causes equally with physical or moral facts. There is a cause for the epic of Homer, for the drama of Shakespeare, for the lyrics of Burns, which are not sudden and fortuitous bursts of emotion but living organisms that betray a common and consistent power of evolution, as there is for muscular movement, for animal heat, for the vices and virtues that make up the mingled yarn of human life in the Homeric, the Elizabethan, or the Georgian Age.

Thought, language, style, do not issue perfectly organized and developed but grow gradually like every other thing. They are products like coal and heat, wheat and bread, alcohol and drunkenness. In the one case as in the other complex phenomena arise from other simple phenomena on which they hang. And although the critic cannot compete with the scientist and reduce everything about Burns to law, or make all the evolutive processes of his art as intelligible as the growth of the chalk cliffs or the coal measures, he can still by proper consideration of the structure of the national character and those distinctive traits of intellect and heart which, in spite of passionate irregularities and fitfully recurring revolutions of conception, are common to one race, one age, one country, arrive at a primitive disposition or dominant tendency which betrays through all the transformations of which it is capable, a certain identity of life and

law. In the grand body of events brought under review he will be able to discover certain general traits or features peculiar to the intellectual life of a century and a people. The art criticised whilst reflecting what is permanent in man will yet show itself in the truest sense strictly local, national, and true to the epoch of its origin.

It is the legitimate, and indeed the obligatory, function of artistic genius and of literature to interpret human nature to itself, and to deal with all those intellectual tendencies which accompany or change the general character of society. And hence the historian does not confine his attention exclusively to the cardinal points on which grand world-revolutions have hinged. He does not even exhaust his duty by simply noting great speculative or social changes such as the establishment of the Protestant religion, the overthrow of the Stuart dynasty, or any other special aspect of history. He searches out the causes after he has collected the facts; and from this or that combination of circumstances—political, moral, economical,—and the issues it has inevitably led to, infers that such and such properties, principles, and practices belong to human society. He describes the existing beliefs, the state of the people affected by such changes of creed and polity; and shows what there was in the condition of the Scotch and English people which enabled Knox and Cromwell to act upon them so

powerfully and so permanently. And in like manner the critic, looking for the origin of human actions not in mysterious properties of the mind but in influences which are palpable and ponderable—race, epoch, surroundings—will not content himself with merely describing as existing the thoughts and sentiments, the great passions and perturbations of the period, but will exhibit them at their white heat in the hearts and souls possessed by them. He will show how those august intellects who have shaped the destinies of the world—such classic personages as Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, Burns, who have taught us how to think and how to act; or Bacon, Descartes, Newton, Kant, who have taught us how to rule over spiritual and over physical nature—were not prodigies cast by Providence athwart “the process of the suns,” but natural growths in the literary evolution of centuries, the normal and inevitable births of Poesy and Time. Each served as the spokesman of his nation, as the vent or outlet of the mind of Humanity in the age to which he belonged. And in the proper place I shall endeavour to show that in a very special sense Burns was the consummating crown or symbol of “the long result of time;” not a prodigy or abnormal product of Scottish literature, but the natural outcome of the centuries and the most distinctly normal of all products, springing in short, from the general elements of all thought, and growing up into form and beauty by a natural and irresistible development, like a flower

growing into fruit, and like fruit turning again to seed.

Nothing is more certain than this, and no writer exemplifies the truth more forcibly than Burns, that in all epoch-making literatures there are discoverable links of connection between man and man, ruling principles by which all are governed, common qualities of national character which betray a unity of aim in specific forms of art, and an organic interdependence of all these different forms to which independent workers have given shape. And if we would ascertain with correctness the course of a principle or the growth of a literary production, we must look at it from a certain distance, and as history represents it to us shooting up complete in stem and foliage and blossom—a thing that has certain well-marked stages of evolution; a beginning, a middle, and an ending in the category of time. Everything that is carried on by human instruments is found, when minutely scrutinized in matters of detail, to have irregularities, resemblances, borrowed splendours, and points of contact with pre-existing models.\* When we come to reflect upon the productive element in any great human creation we are greatly assisted in our study by other surrounding creations which furnish a key of interpretation to the more effective qualities of the individual writer. The faculty, aptitude, disposition of a Burns, a Wordsworth,

\* See Newman *Apologia pro Vita Sua*, 1875, pp. 263-4.

a Scott, are only in the truest sense explicable when we have studied contemporary writings, or mastered his historical relationships, or attained to a just knowledge of the time in which he lived and the circumstances under which he wrote. The spirit of the age has passed into the poetry of these men and provokes the study of literary origins and contemporary events. The past and present thoughts and deeds of men, the creeds and politics and customs of the nation acted directly on their imagination, kindled their emotions, and are recorded in their writings which, serving originally as the living organ of the national voice, become at length and for all time the many-coloured reflection of the national life.

All men in whom genius is paramount consume their own times. This helps to explain why Shakespeare and Burns are intrinsically rich and powerful. They take up into themselves all arts and sciences—the common stores of thought—as their proper food. They are at once original and imitative, representative and participant. And the supreme elevation of either is in a way sufficiently accounted for in the intellectual history of his race. For, just as physical phenomena are bound up with their conditions—dilatation with heat, or the dew with a lowering of the surrounding temperature—so intellectual phenomena are closely connected by laws and rules of growth in the wide field of human psychology which has its material

and its spiritual side. The marvellous expansion of England under Elizabeth,—a time when the pulse of humanity beat high with success and thirst for new enterprise, and the life and literature of the nation, finely touched to a fine issue, were ripe for dramatic embodiment—had much to do with that extraordinary outburst of creative genius which we owe to Shakespeare and his fellow-craftsmen. And the revolutionary fervour of the eighteenth century—an era of quickened activity when modern man regained the consciousness of his own strength and worth—roused into exercise the puissant and combative genius of Burns, whose nature from the first was capable of that intemperate passion which leads too surely to tragic consequences, and whose example as a reforming revolutionary was followed by Shelley in that wonderful romance *The Revolt of Islam*, and by Byron in the masterly satire of *Don Juan*—poets ill-fated as Burns, who lived and died tragically like him, and felt the fierce contention of every struggle that they sang.

In the reign of George III. England, not to say Europe and the world, reached the point of crisis and convulsion. And as the stirring events of the time called into action heroism in the field and eloquence in the Senate, so, at the approach of danger, the creative powers of reason and imagination that in tranquil times are prone to slumber, suddenly broke through the old barriers of conventionality and custom

and took shape in new forms of deep and powerful poetry. With the advent of Burns a maturer force lived and acted in Scottish literature. His choice of subjects and simplicity of treatment inspired a new school of writers whose conformity to vernacular truth has been imitated by the Realist-Impressionists of our own time; and the "tide of Scottish prejudice" carried forward by his verse—of which we have also a faint reminder in the fluent effusion of contemporary kail-yarders—cleared the way for *Waverley* and *Marmion* and the lyrical achievements of Hogg and Tannahill. Nature, ever young and ever fresh, was of course the primary source of Burns's inspiration. Yet he was in the truest sense a product of his time; and the new poetic methods of Cowper (1731-1800) and Crabbe (1754-1832) in England, of Ramsay (1686-1758) and Ferguson (1750-1774) in Scotland, had so far affected all the possibilities of composition in Britain that the poetry of Blake and Burns had become likely, if not inevitable. Probably in Burns's case the laws of natural progress and inheritance came into operation independent of any very clear consciousness on the part of the inheritor, just as the poets whose fame began with the new-born century were probably slow to perceive that the brightened and more bracing mental air that they breathed meant in reality Burns who himself had derived his wit and wisdom from the graves of the old poets. But the fact remains, in the one case as in the other, that

the poet both resumed the past and prophesied the future.

And this leads me to say that nowhere are the laws of descent and inheritance more conspicuously revealed than in the line of genius. Every man receives something from the past to be handed on to the future—at once the heir of all the ages and the father of a new poetic brood. There is a kind of apostolical succession to be noted in the history of poetry whose productive power continues forever operative. Each man's mind has a special structure and a moral history of its own. But it has also a certain kinship with the struggling past. It cannot disdain the fetters of sentiment and tradition nor sever its connection with the aims and achievements of a foregone humanity. The creative artists of particular epochs have a common origin, a common history, a common language, with common principles to assert and common interests to maintain through a medium of expression that is common to all. They all give distinctive indications, in other words, of race and civilisation, and a fundamental intelligence which assimilates and unites them. And the competent critic of a writer like Burns, who really represents the mode of being of a whole nation and a whole age, will have little difficulty in discovering in his work the precise sentiments then prevailing, the contemporary movement of ideas, the sources of his



inspiration, and, in a word, the influences under which his poetry took shape.

### III.

ALL art is more or less the mirror of the age in which it is produced. And the poetry of Burns is no exception to the rule. Like every other channel of emotional expression it moves with the general march of the human mind in the reign of George III., and not only shows how the poet, stung with too keen a sympathy, was caught in the tides and currents of its violent and feverish life, but helps to explain the growth and prominence of the characteristic sentiments and peculiar social ideas of that democratic and declamatory epoch. Burns lived in an era historically characterised by wild and almost passionate unrest, by fierce party struggles at home and long and sanguinary wars abroad; an era of ardent faiths and massive emotions and "mystery-concealing meanness," which culminated in that fierce "battle of will against the social forces of a dozen centuries" distinctively known to us as the European Revolution.

The wonderful events that precluded and accompanied this terrible cataclysm which for a time appeared to interrupt the continuity of history, had the effect upon our poet which all such seeming interruptions of the

common course of things and life have on noble and powerful natures. The great ideas which it set in circulation caught him as they had laid hold of Cowper—a mild precursor of the Revolution who felt his affinity to Burns in spite of a dialect not yet popularised by the genius of Scott—and Blake, an uncompromising republican whose virtue it is true rested on impulse rather than on tradition, yet one to whom the historical movement, in spite of the ghastly phantasmagoria of 1793, incarnated an eternal reality of the imagination—the return of the Golden Age and the perpetual and triumphant progression of emancipated man. In the defiant independence and reckless enthusiasm of Burns's conduct, in the ardent passion and ambitious power of his verse, both directed in eager rebellion against the cruelties and oppressions of the world, we discover the ineradicable contagion and fever-frenzy of contemporary thought. His surroundings and associates, the teachings of nature and the dignity of peasant life, had always been such indeed that he could scarcely realize to himself any other than a democratic type of society.

Burns can hardly be said to have come up out of the midst of the eighteenth century with the revolutionary idea. But his youthful intellect had been nourished with the nervous phrases of Rousseau; and these left ineffaceable marks on his character and maturer writings. His imagination had responded with peculiar energy to the abstractions of the revolutionary

creed. And, arrived at manhood, he endeavoured to verify his republican theories and realize his precocious cosmopolitan dreams. His sympathy with the national passion of joy and hope in France was spontaneous and involuntary, like that of Coleridge, or, more truly, of Wordsworth, who had listened to the speeches of the Girondins in the National Assembly, and was an ardent partisan of the actual politics proper to the end of last century. He had their faith in the immense promises of the time; their haughty devotion to the cause of liberty. As an insurgent against the commonly-recognised dogmas of religion and social life, he naturally enough showed unreserved and absorbing interest in the daring deeds of the Dantonists and Girondins, in the reasoned self-confidence of Robespierre and Saint-Just and the first propagators of philosophic radicalism, who produced a series of events which, rapidly following one another, from 1789 like fierce waves of the sea, kept a-glow Burns's heart and imagination and seemed to justify the belief which Rousseau had expressed, that such a movement would widen the life and reinforce the energies of man's higher self, and promote and preserve the happiness of the whole world. It was under this impression that he gave (1st January 1795) in the great song of *For a' that and a' that* a rhythmical condensation of the famous shibboleth of contemporary French politics and defined that highest goal of enlightened socialism to which,—as interpreted by the purer spirits of the Revolution,—

the doctrine of "liberty, equality, and fraternity," which always found an echo in his inmost heart, pointed the way :—

Then let us pray that come it may—  
As come it will for a' that—  
That sense and worth, o'er a' the earth,  
May bear the gree, and a' that.  
For a' that, and a' that,  
It's comin' yet, for a' that,  
That man to man, the warld o'er,  
Shall brothers be for a' that !

The last seven years of Burns's life were passed in the middle of the strange and unaccountable hallucinations of the period. Thrown back upon his own craving heart, overflowing with bitter thought and unsatisfied passion, he became a "sharer in the general vortex," and at first looked, without shrinking, upon the severe measures enforced by the leaders of the Revolution. The movement, in its aims at least, confirmed his high opinion of the essential worth of man. It may be said that the wonder, the sympathy, the enthusiasm which thus lifted him out of himself were untempered and uninformed by the accurate knowledge of a disciplined mind. It may even be said that like Blake who, after the September massacres and the execution of Louis XVI., discarded his cockade and *bonnet rouge*, Burns simply revelled incuriously in the first Maytime of revolutionary enthusiasm. And yet there is abundant evidence to show that whilst he failed to see that the movement laboured under a

primary and essential disadvantage of postponing moral to intellectual liberation, he regarded, as any hot-headed Girondin might have done in early Revolution days, the downfall of despotism and privilege, and the terrible retribution exacted for centuries of wrong done to the poor and weak by rapacious nobles and licentious Kings, as the grandest exhibition of human enlightenment and progress towards the perfect known to modern times; and in proof of his sympathy with the revolutionary party he despatched in 1792 four carronades to the French Convention with an autograph letter congratulating them on having repulsed Conservative Europe — an indiscretion which Lockhart rightly characterises as an absurd and presumptuous breach of decorum in a salaried official of the British Crown. Nor must it be forgotten that he made an earlier and more emphatic public proclamation of his devotion to the cause of freedom in France. With a strange and savage gaiety which recalls the brisk but ominous melody of the *Ça ira* that sounded, terrible as the footfall of the Eumenides, above the death-tumult of an effete and expiring society in 1790, he celebrates the Tree of Liberty, planted “where ance the Bastille stood,” as the symbol of a new divinity for the universal worship of mankind:—

Upo' this tree there grows sic fruit,  
Its virtues a' can tell, man;  
It raises man abune the brute,  
It maks him ken himsel, man.

Gif ance the peasant taste a bit,  
 He's greater than a lord, man,  
 And wi' the beggar shares a mite  
 O' a' he can afford, man.

\* \* \* \*

My blessings aye attend the chiel,  
 Wha pitied Gallia's slaves, man,  
 And staw'd a branch, spite o' the de'il,  
 Frae yont the western waves, man.  
 Fair Virtue water'd it wi' care,  
 And now she sees wi' pride, man,  
 How weel it buds and blossoms there,  
 Its branches spreading wide, man.

But vicious folk aye hate to see  
 The works o' Virtue thrive, man ;  
 The courtly Vermin's banned the tree,  
 And grat to see it thrive, man ;  
 King Loui' thought to cut it down,  
 When it was unco sma', man ;  
 For this the watchman cracked his crown,  
 Cut aff his head an' a', man.

\* \* \* \*

Wae worth the loon wha wadna eat  
 Sic halesome dainty cheer, man ;  
 I'd gie my shoon frae aff my feet,  
 To taste sic fruit, I swear, man.  
 Syne let us pray, auld England may  
 Sure plant this far-famed tree, man ;  
 And blythe we'll sing, and hail the day  
 That gave us liberty, man.

As this quick and fearless outwelling of revolutionary thought amply testifies, Burns's high-souled indepen-

dence would not allow him to conceal his sympathy with the movement in the letter. And, although his work contains no other piece at all resembling this strain with which he sought to swell the chorus of exultation raised by the poets of the Germanic and Latin races, *in the spirit* the marks of his political sympathies are left in the frequent and fierce declarations of his independence, in his attacks on the tyranny with which, as he thought, the Pitt administration ruled Scotland, and in his merciless satires on the hollow theology of the time. Long before philosophers had formulated the idea of the organic unity of the race, Burns had proclaimed the brotherhood of man. His message was one of world-wide significance. He was a Scotchman to the core ; but he was first a man and taught with convincing power a wider faith. From 1789 he clung desperately to republican theories in matters of Church and State ; all his philanthropic ideas are suffused with the revolutionary colour ; and it cannot be doubted that, whilst his zeal in the cause of the New Light party and his steady inclination to the Whig opposition seriously affected his worldly prospects, the hopes and overthrows of the Revolution itself gave largeness to his sympathies and reality and power to his ideas. But for it, indeed, his poetry would not have had the power of impulsion which it still possesses—the power of inspiring and supporting those steadfast and generous advances towards the improvement of

social, political, and religious life which, following upon the lines of the great humanitarian movement initiated by Cowper, Wesley, Howard, and Wilberforce, are among the most mark-worthy features of nineteenth-century history. His verse has provided principles for the liturgy of patriots, and "mottoes of the heart" for the use and service of every humanitarian propagandist since his day.

It must be admitted, however, that whilst this movement tended to inflame and enrich his imagination with fresh and forceful ideas and new and vivid emotions, it also led him astray into paths of fatuity and excess. When the French outburst of freedom was transformed into the tyranny of a republican Terror, and democracy blindly steered its way through blood and crime, Burns's ardour in the continental struggle was no whit abated. He had accepted the sonorous watchwords of universal humanity, and was even able to put forward his faith as a series of rhymed credenda. He had dealt fluently and musically in all the platitudes of fervid republicanism. And so far he had only done what others had done in Britain—notably Blake, Coleridge, and Wordsworth. But whilst those who had at first favoured the Revolution were alarmed by the Reign of Terror, and clearly perceived, after the September massacres and the invasion of Versailles by the Poissardes, that what once seemed the holiest



and highest of causes had gradually been converted into a desperate rage of destruction and witless wickedness that was destined to bring a blinding pain of frustration and disappointment to every hoping heart, Burns with all his worldly wisdom failed to see that there was doubtful safety under the Tree of Liberty the planting of which he had so exultingly celebrated; that everything in short had vanished except those crimes committed in its name which rendered humanity the reverse of worshipful.

The Revolution acted then as an educating influence for himself, as a means of perfecting his individual being and enriching his poetical gift and faculty. It appears, for instance, from his letter to Mr Thomson of September 1793, that *Bruce's Address* owes its inspiration quite as much to the poet's sympathy with the French Republicans as to his Scottish patriotism. But Burns unfortunately had not the disciplined and law-loving nature of a Wordsworth. Neither had he the cultivated moderation of tone which distinguished a Coleridge. He had not even that transient superiority to the illusions of passion which prevented such a "strengthless dreamer" as the poet-painter Blake—avowedly a "Liberty Boy" to the end of life—from treating pain and blood-shedding as things worthy of but slight regard. With all his powers of discernment and firmness of nerve and fibre he lacked the reflective

foresight and ethical strength required for estimating the true worth and regulating the movement of those violent and explosive elements amongst which he lived. And hence after such bloody interpolations in the tale of freedom as those which the diurnal record of the Terror supplied, Burns chafing at his servitude to Government, continued to justify the Revolution to his conscience as a movement which manifested its sacred origin even by such lurid and self-evidencing light as that afforded by the gruesome acts which transformed the Place de Carrousel into a swamp of human blood.

At the heart of his enthusiasm there was therefore for a time a sternness and a stoicism not usually associated with a poet so genial and humane, whose verse, more truly than any since Shakespeare's, has, as Pitt declared soon after Burns's death, "so much the appearance of coming sweetly from nature." Unmoved by the blaze and carnage of the time, and resolutely opposed to the Tory Government which had reprobated the revolutionary Liberalism that had broken out at Paris in 1789 and thus culminated in the tragedies of the Terror, he continued to show devotion to a cause which had ceased to be a struggle for liberty and become a wild attempt to enslave the world and uproot the very life of virtue in mankind. And in his avowal of democracy, it must be admitted, Burns not unfrequently exhibited

some of the hardest and coarsest qualities of the Whiggism of his time. He not only lauded Whig men and theories in electioneering ballads, but scurrilously lampooned the supporters of Dundas, then the autocrat of Scottish affairs. He openly defied authority and reviled the Ministry, just as he had written in 1787 treasonable verses on the inn window at Stirling. On one occasion he toasted Washington as a person worthier of a patriotic bumper than Pitt ; \* on another he gave as a sentiment, "Here's the last verse of the last chapter of the last Book of Kings ;" and in 1795 ~~he even~~ denounced the war on which the government had determined, and gave as a toast at a supper table, "May our success in the present war be equal to the justice of our cause." These, and other utterances of a similar character that might be cited, sufficiently illustrate the drastic downrightness of Burns's opinions and his deep-rooted sympathy with Whigs and Reform.

But there is another side to the picture. We must not forget that certain modifications of moral and intellectual temper are noticeable in the poet's work between 1789 and 1795. His veneration for the stuff

\* This is a small matter, perhaps, since history, as Lockhart suggested (*Life of Burns*, p. 179) has justified the preference of Burns, whose "apostate reformer" compares favourably with Coleridge's description of the great Minister in the *Morning Chronicle*, then a Radical organ, as "the dark slinker who kissed his country with Iscariot lips." (See Alois Brandl, *Coleridge and the English Romantic School*, 1887, p. 94.)

of common human nature, his democratic sense of the dignity of manhood, his deep sympathy with suffering nations, — these are abiding things, continually strengthened and sustained by his intercourse with the hardy and high-hearted peasantry of Kyle and Nithsdale, in whose patient endurance and laborious toil he discovered the “sense and worth” which, in the spirit of his song, constitute the sole natural basis of privilege. No portion of the body of his thought and emotion escapes their pervading power. But he gradually comes to care less for theories of human progress and political abstractions and revolutionary hero-worships, and more for the concrete details of the actual life lived by individual men and women around him. In other words, his sympathies attach themselves not to mere shibboleths or abstract notions, but to an actual cause whose high aims and far-reaching ideas are related to the happiness and dignity of the living body of society as a whole. Burns still believes steadfastly in the new Gospel of brotherhood and freedom. He still clings tenaciously to the idea that the Golden Age is coming back to change and elevate the world. And he is more firmly persuaded than ever that in the near future genius and goodness, the higher qualities of mind and heart, will form the only real distinctions, the only true titles of rank and power. But he no longer believes that the renovation of the earth and the elevation of the race are to be

miraculously brought about by spasmodic rebellions and ghastly revolutions that temporarily denaturalise man and deprive society of its vital functions. The much-wished-for consummation is to be realized by strenuous individual effort, by personal worth and domestic virtue, by the deep fraternity of nations patiently and peacefully developed.

Burns has insight and hope and a faith which craves a higher blessing for humanity than any which the ruin of French monarchy can promise or procure. To the future and not to any Constituent Assembly, he looks with consuming eagerness to justify his confidence in France, in America—in democracy. The French Revolution is only the forerunner of deep change, of a grander revolution that shall come; so that to him the aspect of the present is both sad and encouraging. He never really sacrifices the larger interests of the future to the clamorous or excessive demands of the hour. The deepest passion of his life is to see the wrong righted, to see moral worth redeemed from poverty, to see benevolence and brotherhood triumphant. His aim, in short, is the regeneration of the body social which is in reality the Kingdom of God that "cometh not with observation" but is actually within us and about us. Hence at Ellisland he sings—

To make a happy fire-side clime  
To weans and wife,

That's the true pathos and sublime  
Of human life.

And after his migration to Dumfries a material change is perceptible in the quality of his political sentiments. In this connection it is instructive to compare the verses quoted above from the *Tree of Liberty* of 1789, with these stanzas from the patriotic song *Does haughty Gaul invasion threat?* which belongs to the year 1795 ;—

O let us not like snarling tykes  
In wrangling be divided ;  
'Till, slap, come in an unco loon  
And wi' a rung decide it.  
Be Britain still to Britain true,  
Amang oursels united ;  
For never but by British hands  
Maun British wrangs be righted !

The kettle o' the Kirk and State,  
Perhaps a claut may fail in't ;  
But de'il a foreign tinkler loon  
Shall ever ca' a nail in't.  
Our fathers' bluid the kettle bought,  
And wha wad dare to spoil it ;  
By heaven, the sacrilegious dog  
Shall fuel be to boil it.

The wretch that wad a tyrant own,  
And the wretch his true-born brother,  
Who would set the mob aboon the throne,  
May they be d——d together !  
Who will not sing, " God save the King,"  
Shall hang as high's the steeple ;  
But while we sing, " God save the King,"  
We'll ne'er forget the People.

Here we see that the patriotic fire burns purely in the poet's breast. There is neither the bladdery swell of Jingoism, nor the smoke and stench of Chauvinism in such verse as this. It simply exhibits Burns as a Scotchman proud of his nationality, but at the same time as a believer who does not waver in his early democratic faith. He strikes a mean between the French revolutionary ethics of the time and the constitutional principles fixed and determined by the English Revolution of 1688, which had for its object neither the putting an end to "the divine right of Kings," nor the substitution, in the government of the country, of privilege for prerogative. It at once preserved the rights of the Crown and secured the liberties of the People. His radicalism in its final phase is of that sane and sober kind which neither aims Quixotically at the reconstruction of society on new and abstract lines, nor favours the exaltation of the mob at the expense of monarchy. He holds himself in hand. The balance is fairly well kept. Amidst the ocean of new experiences and desires on which he is suddenly launched, he never quite loses command over his course. He would have all men sing "God save the King," but only on condition that they remembered the People, for whom, and not for the glory of individuals, all powers and privileges were intended. The changes in his fundamental principles, in his thoughts of man and his duties, were after all not very great, although there

is noticeable as we shall see a material alteration in his application of them to the parties and institutions by which they were to be guarded and carried out.

## IV.

To one who does not wholly fail in sympathy with Burns's genius, there will be comparatively little difficulty therefore in reconciling the apparent contradictions of his political verse during the years 1789-1795, or in fixing the position which he finally occupied. His immediate ancestors, we must remember, had espoused the cause of the Stuarts, and in his early days Burns himself had airily sported a sentimental Jacobitism. It is no doubt true that genius is in a sense without ancestry or lineage. And yet there are elements of character and qualities of mind which seem to be as clearly transmissible from parent to child as the features of the countenance or the lines of the bodily frame. And when the poet sighs in song to see *Jamie come hame* we have surely a faint echo of the paternal sentiment which involved William Burnes in the troubles of 1745. The traditional faith of the father colours the imagination of the son. It represents however a transient mood, not a fixed principle. His Jacobitism was obviously but skin deep and meaningless as far as contemporary politics were concerned; a poetic property, or



amiable delusion, not a thing of reasoned conviction. It may be said indeed to have originated in discontent with the Union of 1707, and to have been kept alive by a keen sense of the national degradation resulting from that event, as manifested, according to Burns, in the existing social order. This is amply borne out by his ultra-patriotic poem *The Union* commencing "Farewell to a' our Scottish fame." But that it was essentially sentimental and transient is clearly proved by the poet's letter to the *Star* newspaper, of date 8th November 1788, in which he says,—"The Stuarts have been condemned and laughed at for the folly and impracticability of their attempts in 1715 and 1745. That they failed, I bless God, but cannot join in the ridicule against them." And then he adds significantly, "I daresay the American Congress in 1776 will be allowed to be as able and as enlightened as the English Convention was in 1688, and that their posterity will celebrate the centenary of their deliverance from us as duly and sincerely as we do ours from the oppressive measures of the wrong-headed House of Stuarts." This is a sensible utterance, and, so far, makes his position plain to us.

But then again there is a sense in which much the same may be said of Burns's Radicalism. It was primarily, and not unnaturally, a sentimental protest against the hardness of his own lot, and also against "man's inhumanity to man" in general. It may have

originated in a deep sympathy with the spiritual life of suffering nations ; but it also originated in personal discontent, in wounded pride and chronic exasperation at himself—things constantly nourished and sustained by the violent sentiments, similarly self-generated, of the robustious pot-house politicians with whom he consorted at Dumfries. This is proved, I think, by the picture he paints and the pertinent and searching questions he puts in the poem from which I have just quoted :—

See yonder poor, o'erlaboured wight,  
 So abject, mean, and vile,  
 Who begs a brother of the earth  
 To give him leave to toil ;  
 And see his lordly fellow-worm  
 The poor petition spurn,  
 Unmindful, though a weeping wife  
 And helpless offspring mourn.

If I'm design'd yon lordling's slave—  
 By Nature's law designed—  
 Why was an independent wish  
 E'er planted in my mind ?  
 If not, why am I subject to  
 His cruelty or scorn ?  
 Or why has man the will and power  
 To make his fellow mourn ?

Burns's ailment was the ailment of his time. And that, as we have seen, was the very reverse of lassitude and satiety. It showed itself in a feverish expectancy and blind eagerness for life ; in bold protests in favour of individuality and against the monotonizing character

of civilized existence in traditional and unreformed Scotland. Wilful and arrogant personalism, premature ambition towards achievement, a consuming desire, (originating in half-conceived ideas derived from foreign sources), to tear asunder the old disguises of conventionality and custom and create a new order of society on the ruins of the old,—these were the chief symptoms of the prevailing fever-frenzy of an age which had grown sick of classicity and unreality in life and in literature. And Burns, the master-poet of the suffering poor, with his craving for deep truth and reality, could not, and did not, escape the dominating influences of his time. His poems and songs voiced the social aspirations of his countrymen who were groaning under wrongs that had remained unredressed since the time of the Union, which had destroyed the nationality and almost the political existence of Scotland; and they formed moreover a kind of chart or programme of political reform and progress that closely identified him with the Revolution. But when Burns, carrying particulars into generals and adopting and commending the ideas and lawless methods of Jacobin France, assailed the aristocratical institutions which form the support of monarchy and denounced as despots the rulers of his own country, he was simply objectifying the radical distemper of his own nature which was apt to be savagely impatient under a sense of energy cruelly repressed by evil fortune, and merit systematically neglected by the privileged classes; and to a certain

extent his intense enthusiasm for reform may be properly enough described as an expanded egotism not unlike that which reveals itself in the writings of Swift. "He was sick, and so was the whole body politic. He needed reform, so, of course, did the whole world." That is how the case is put in a sentence by Alexander Smith; and not unfairly.\* For it cannot be denied that it is the personal accent which gives character and interest to his most powerful and pathetic remonstrances and appeals. In short, as his Jacobitism sprang from his imagination, so his Radicalism grew in large measure out of dissatisfaction with himself and the life that he lived. It must not be supposed, however, that he was in any sense or at any time a pretender or a renegade. The democratic feeling was deeply and permanently rooted in his mind, which also quite consistently preserved a kind of ideal loyalty to the later Stuarts that outlasted all the changes of his time. Nevertheless it must be admitted that it is sometimes difficult to reconcile Burns the poet of Humanity with Burns the Jacobinical exciseman. In all he writes he seems to be glad not to go too far, and yet it is obvious that his chief dread is lest he be left behind. With no real or solid foundation either for his ardent Jacobitism or his excessive Jacobinism, yet a debtor to both sources for the ideas and sentiments to which his poetry owes its vitality and currency among men to whom the Doric is an unknown tongue, Burns by the singular

\* See Smith *Critical Memoir* (Globe ed. of Burns) p, xxxii.

fluctuations of his political faith furnishes a striking illustration of the fact that the inevitable snare of violence is contradiction.

And yet there is a way of reconciling the apparent contradictions of his political verse. Macaulay has somewhere said that anyone who held exactly the same opinions about the Revolution in 1789 and 1794, would have been either a prophet divinely inspired or an obstinate fool. And it is needless to say that Burns, who had ample experience of his own fallibility, was neither the one nor the other. The extravagant elation of the early period of hope and aspiration, and the as extravagant depression or obscure dejection of the later time of doubt and distraction which limited the operation of his unique poetic gift in the service of political propagandism, were things perfectly natural and perfectly explainable. The one state of mind was, as I have incidentally shown, due to political prejudices which were his by inheritance—he was avowedly (see the forecited letter of November 8, 1788) “bred and educated in Revolution principles;” and the other, as shall presently appear, was even more palpably due to the presence of external circumstances on the super-sensitive nature of a poet by whom no touch of the world of thought and passion was disregarded, and to whom, as truly, every moment of life brought its painful contribution of experimental, individual knowledge. His mind oscillated undoubtedly between the

real and the unreal or only half-real. Now he is possessed with the amiable delusions of Jacobitism, as in *The Chevalier's Lament*, or the feeble *Fragment of an Ode* to the memory of Prince Charlie; and again he displays the defiant democratic impulse of an inbred and invincible Radicalism in that mighty pæan of the new age *A Man's a man for a' that*. And as of his poetry, so of his prose which not unfrequently displays a genius germane to that of the poems. At one time he boasts himself a free and independent republican and virtually hails the victory of the French revolutionaries as the dawn of a new Saturnian age. At another he lauds the glorious Revolution of 1688 as "the auspicious event to which we owe no less than our liberties, civil and religious." And, finally, he makes a somewhat piteous profession of his constitutional predilections. In short, his life and character, and his writings which in the strictest sense reproduce his antithetically blended nature, present a continual half-conscious attempt at a real and practical compromise between these opposing elements. But after all the extreme points of the oscillation are not very remote. And although it would require a great stretch of imagination indeed to discover that his principles were in 1794-5 the same as those which he held in 1789, it is certain that the change which passed on his mind was not only a change to be expected in a man gifted with strong imagination and quick sensibility, but one that passed on the mind of those who became the chief exponents and deter-

mining forces of the new poetic movement which Cowper and Burns initiated—Blake, Coleridge, Wordsworth. Nay more, in the final analysis it will be found that few of his contemporaries changed so little.

Be that, however, as it may, the time came when the red sun of Jacobin enthusiasm no longer shone with lurid splendour on the page of Burns. His generous and vivid faith in humanity remained unclouded; but the vehemence of the revolutionary spirit gradually subsided and at length disappeared. Although to his fancy, as to Byron's and Shelley's later, America was the risen and guiding star of the future, Burns no longer took his stand on the principles of a Republic, but on those of the Constitution. His democracy was never in conflict with his feeling of nationality. Broadly speaking, the opinions in which he at last reposed, and to which, in spite of his avowed dislike to the Brunswick dynasty—"an idiot race to honour lost," as he calls the Hanoverians with quite unnecessary emphasis—and his genuine antipathy to the established dynasties of the Continent, he adhered to the end with a firm and ill-requited fidelity, were those of a loyal Constitutionalist who recognised that the rights of man were massed and consolidated in the rights of nations. In one place he prays that the day may never come when "royal heads are hunted like a maukin" (hare) as in Jacobin France; and elsewhere we have these lines obviously inspired in reaction.

against his own earlier sympathy with the King-abolishing Revolution :—

Still in prayers for King George I most heartily join,  
 The Queen and the rest of the gentry ;  
 Be they wise, be they foolish, is nothing of mine,  
 Their title's avowed by my country.

Both in verse and prose Burns latterly preached respect for the English Constitution in its fundamental principles, instead of recommending as formerly a blind imitation of the French nation, to which however he adhered until her invasion of Holland completely alienated his sympathies. But it is in his correspondence that we find his most emphatic protestations of loyalty. In the famous *apologia* addressed to Graham of Fintry in December 1792 he declares that “to the British Constitution, on revolution principles, next after my God, I am most devoutly attached.” A certain suspicion has attached to this pious profession. And perhaps not unnaturally. For, *ex facie* of the letter itself, it was elicited, or rather extorted, under painful pressure of external circumstance. Want, which makes no distinctions of Tory or Republican, was staring him in the face. In the early poetical epistle *To Dr Blacklock*, dated from Ellisland 21st October 1789, he had vowed that to save his “wife and twa wee laddies” from the horrors of want he would “snead besoms” or “thraw saugh woodies ;” and it was



in 1792, when the potential peril of which his heart had premonished him was converted into an imminent actuality,—when he discovered that his boisterous optimism was more than likely to have the effect of turning Bonnie Jean and his helpless offspring adrift into the world “degraded and disgraced from a situation in which they had been respectable and respected”—that this brief yet pregnant confession of political faith was perñed. That it was due, however, to no rare and hurried throb of loyalty, no sudden and hectic flush of patriotic pride in a heart pressed into surrender of personal principle by feelings of natural piety, is clearly shown by the later letter of 13th April 1793, addressed to Erskine of Mar, in which he thus sums up his defence to the accusations brought against him as a person disaffected to Government :—“ I said, that whatever might be my sentiments of republics, ancient or modern, as to Britain I abjured the idea : that a constitution, which, in its original principles, experience had proved to be every way fitted for our happiness in society, it would be insanity to sacrifice to an untried visionary theory : that, in consideration of my being situated in a department, however humble, immediately in the hands of people in power, I had forborne taking any active part, either personally or as an author, in the present business of Reform ; but that, where I must declare my sentiments, I would say there existed a system of corruption between the executive

power and the representative part of the Legislature, which boded no good to our glorious Constitution, and which every patriotic Briton must wish to see amended." No one can doubt the austere sincerity of that utterance.

Everything then tends to show that whilst Burns had been an eager Pittite during the reforming part of the great minister's career, he gave in his personal adhesion to the Whig party in whose ranks he found all his friends and patrons; and that although his approval of the fanatical propagandism of the Jacobins might justify one in setting him down as something more democratic than a Whig, his principles were substantially those of the old-fashioned Whiggery of his age. He strenuously opposed everything that savoured of Toryism—privilege, obscurantism, *laissez faire*, and the still preponderant power of the Crown. Yet, in the final phase of his thought, he was in the truest sense a loyal Constitutionalist. Having, as the *Epistle from Esopus to Maria* clearly shows, been supplied with forcible lessons in prudence by the political martyrs of 1793-4, he did not make nationality or obedience to constituted authority subservient to the principles of the Revolution in which to the end of life he theoretically rested. Perhaps it would be right to say therefore that Burns in his last years was what we should now call an opportunist. He looked forward in the future to certain political and

social changes ; but meanwhile—though no man had ever less of the Quietist temper of mind—he had no desire to hurry matters. On the contrary it would seem that he ultimately favoured the view that meddling with nature was a dangerous process, and that undue haste would inevitably cause accidents and delay. He deprecated war, advocated the consolidation of imperial interests, and was quite content to make the best possible use of existing institutions, under the firm persuasion that any bettering of the condition of the masses was essentially a work of time and patience.

## V.

Now the fact which the foregoing observations are intended to elucidate and enforce is that, in relation to the main bent of the poet's mind and the future development of his powers, the French Revolution constituted the most important educational influence and stimulus which the time could have supplied. His poetry not only mirrors human nature in the Georgian era in all the breadth and emphasis of its interests, convictions, and activities, but reflects the leading sentiments and ideas which went to mould and shape his own character and career — all the elements and forces which, derived from America and France, combined to make him operative and efficient

as the master-poet of Democracy. Wherefore it seems to me impossible rightly to understand either the eighteenth century in England or Burns's relation to it, without paying special attention to the movement abroad of which the English phase was the reflex and the organ. Of course, Scotland, or, to speak more correctly, Britain, chiefly concerns us here. But the spirit of an age which a great poet incarnates and reproduces can never be strictly confined to its action in any one country. France quite as much as England brought about the renovation in our manner of thinking. And the New World inspired the Old with those visions of political liberty which gave rise to the practical reforms of the eighteenth century. Hence Burns in *The Tree of Liberty*, already quoted, blesses the man who "pitied Gallia's slaves" and "staw'd a branch, spite o' the de'il, frae yont the Western waves." In the truths which he discovered, the exaggerations he committed, the doctrines he preached, and the alliances he formed, Burns, whilst the chief exponent of a new and distinctively national movement, still showed himself inspired by the socialistic uprising in America and the first triumphs of Liberalism in France. This is demonstrated by the fragment *When Guilford good*, in which the incidents and events of the American War, and the resultant struggle in the House of Commons during the session of 1783, are cleverly discussed, and a dark hint conveyed at the close of the approaching conflict of

classes which the French Revolution, hastened by the transatlantic revolt, very soon realised. In a word, the great rising tide of the modern mind swept onwards to Britain from thence, and exercised an important influence on the history of our religion, politics, and art. And hence it seemed necessary to speak at some length of those political events which fired the imagination of our poet and furnished indeed the objective occasion of some of his most spirited verse.

I shall have failed, however, in my purpose if the reader is led to infer from what has been said that Burns properly belongs to the class of Destructives. He was not, like Shelley, a formidable propagator of anarchist ideas in religion and politics. On the contrary, I believe that his poetry was really useful in maintaining a standard of constitutional freedom and government among the common people when the nation was oscillating (1790-1795) between anarchy and despotism. He was undoubtedly swayed by a fierce democratic impulse in his mind that too frequently rested on no solid foundation, so that his rebellion against conventions, sacred or secular, oftentimes appears somewhat paradoxical. But in the main he simply yielded to the fine illusions of the time which lighted up the spirits of such great singers as Wordsworth and Coleridge. These men had actually stood, as he had stood in imagination,

among the ruins of the Bastille "on the top of golden hours," or loitered by the Loire listening with uplifted hearts to "the homeless sound of joy" that filled the sky, as the world revolved into a nobler dawn. And yet they were destined, when France lost faith and freedom, whilst retaining a certain radicalism of temperament and instinct, to preach a stern and intolerant Conservatism vastly different from what has been called the self-contradictory constitutionalism of Burns, in which however some critics—Chambers among the number—forgetting that the terms Tory and Jacobite were no more convertible in 1786 than they are convertible in the year of grace 1896, have professed to find traces of Toryism disguised in the form of reactions; the fact being that fundamentally Burns's political faith either resembled from start to finish the utilitarian liberalism of Burke, or, in its final phase, amounted simply to a liberal moderation of Whiggism, to a calm and sagacious suspense of judgment consequent upon the discovery that the tendency of the revolutionary drama was to separate social freedom from justice to individual man. Writing in September 1792 Burns says:—"In my ploughboy days I could not conceive it possible that a noble lord could be a fool or a godly man a knave." Like most of us, however, he outlived the amiable superstitions of his nonage. The American War, the French Revolution, and the tyranny of Scotch officials created and maintained

by the *régime* of the wily and autocratic Dundas, opened his eyes, and led him strenuously to oppose everything in the social and political systems of his day which tended to fractionise human power or uproot the faith of individuality, to deny movement, or arrest the march of intelligence among the lower orders to which by birth he belonged. And when the poet, in the *Elegy on the Year 1788*, wrote the lines—

For Lords or Kings I dinna mourn,  
E'en let them die—for that they're born ;

or when he sang in 1795—

A prince can mak' a belted knight,  
A marquis, duke, an' a' that ;  
But an honest man's aboon his might,  
Guid faith he maunna fa' that—

he was not so much giving expression to abstract democratic theories, or any special personal aversion to monarchy, as revealing the ever-widening discrepancy between modern political ideas and the theory of Kingship that obtained after the attempt of George III. to resuscitate the royal authority in electoral matters. In a word, the *Inscription for an Altar to Independence*, also written the year before his death, attests the unalterable character of his primary convictions and their compatibility with respectful submission to authority ; or, in other words, shows that his earlier self, though softened by the constitu-

tional faith of his later personality, was not extinct but only transfigured and transformed.

Thou of an independent mind,  
With soul resolv'd, with soul resign'd ;  
Prepar'd Power's proudest frown to brave,  
Who wilt not be, nor have a slave ;  
Virtue alone who dost revere,  
Thy own reproach alone dost fear,  
Approach this shrine, and worship here.

In these lines the Whig poet organizes around one great idea of faith and hope and sacred daring the aspirations of the democracy which it was the special mission of his muse to spiritualise. As a Constitutionalist, Burns is a maintainer of things spiritual against the grosser interests of human life.

If, however, Burns, as a true child of the critical eighteenth century, voiced the hopes and aspirations of his age in that little Kilmarnock volume of 1786 which, more truly than Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads* of 1798, may fitly be described as the clarion-call of the new poetry, he also displayed, naturally enough, something of its curious crotchets and lurking ignorance, its arbitrary humours and undoubting dogmatism. The era of George III., who never ceased to struggle for an increase of the kingly authority and could not understand a conscientious dissent from his own opinion, was a mass of contradictions and wrong-headed prejudices. Made up, like all other epochs,



of every element to be found in human nature, it may be answered with justice that it could not be otherwise. But there were special circumstances in the sixty years during which government was carried on in the name and under the authority of George III. which render this characterisation peculiarly appropriate;—notably the troubles arising from the loss of our American Colonies, and the changes of party leaders that ensued; Fox's strange scheme of governing the nation by an aristocracy, with the aid of his India Bill, and the reactionary policy of Pitt who turned his back on reform when he overthrew the coalition of North and Fox in 1784; the fatal interference with the concerns of France in 1793; and the endangerment of the peace of the country through persistent rejection of the claim for Catholic emancipation. And Burns, deeply imbued with the vacillating spirit of this contradictory age, and for a time even moved to admiration of the tyrannies of a regicide jacobinism, displayed the irrationality of the modern genius, and many of those deep-lying faults of heart and temper which, in all ages, drive into haughty and violent courses men who are naturally prone to combat and discussion and largely dependent upon outward events for their inspiration. Nor was he unconscious of his own fickleness and fatuity. In a letter of 1793 he explicitly declares that his reform opinions were "unguardedly sported with" before he was "aware of the complexion of these innovating times"; and,

he cautiously adds, "henceforth I seal my lips." Of all this we get a much earlier reminder however in *A Dream*, the poet's birthday address to the King:—

Far be't frae me that I aspire  
 To blame your legislation,  
 Or say, ye wisdom want, or fire,  
 To rule this mighty nation ;  
 But faith ! I muckle doubt, my Sire,  
 Ye've trusted Ministration  
 To chaps, wha, in a barn or byre,  
 Wad better fill'd their station  
 Than courts yon day.

But in spite of social and political excitements and contradictory ardours and aspirations, the age and the man were alike rich in constructive forces ; in harmonizing and conciliatory ideas that have made man's destiny easier, and enabled him to advance joyously towards new discovery of truth. Burns felt the pulse of his age with surprising exactitude, and perfectly understood its most striking characteristics. He comprehended its hopes ; and, more than most men, he carried its sorrows. With his great thoughts and ardent passions which were of first-rate importance with reference to his time, he was able to bless mankind with healing promise or save them by wholesome word of warning. He has thus a certain affinity to those poets who are also and primarily prophets. Like Dante and Milton and Wordsworth, —the great teachers of Sorrow and of Faith, who liberated the conscience and enlarged the horizons of

humanity—he received divine oracles to deliver to the men of his own day. And it is only the fanatic or the fool who feels an emotion of revolt when one speaks of Burns and Milton in the same breath, or asserts that Burns,—the spokesman of Humanity in the eighteenth century, in spite of his half-irreverent sportiveness,—has no great authentic word of the Lord to utter, and no zeal to justify, in his own informal fashion, the ways of God to man.

## VI.

WITH some modification, what has been said of the poet may be repeated of the age which he interpreted so consistently and influenced so deeply that Carlyle has ventured to affirm that “no other man was so well entitled to be at the head of the public affairs of his day.” The eighteenth century is constantly represented to us in modern criticism as an era of destruction and revolution. And if attention be strictly confined to the blood-stained explosion and struggle in France, the justice of that characterisation must of course be admitted. But it is only a narrow mind that can thus restrict its view to one aspect of what is regarded by all sound criticism as the mightiest change in human history. The political Revolution was at most but a symptom of a want more widely felt, an incident in a movement much larger than

itself. And the changes it effected and the problems it solved were but elements in a process that had been developing cryptically for centuries, and one whose primary and predestined purpose was the resettlement of modern life common to all parts of the civilized world. We must, therefore, beware of treating it, in relation to literature, as an isolated phenomenon. Revolt, even when it means liberty; change, even when it implies a total revolution in the manners and sentiments of society; and the sad heritage of strife and confusion which the work of political reformation inevitably leaves behind—these things, of which Literature becomes the mirror and the organ, form but a part, and indeed but a small part, of a century's activity and achievement. We must be careful, therefore, not to confound the intellectual evolution of the thought of the epoch, with its material application or practical consequences. The essence of the nineteenth century for instance does not lie in Chartist riots and Orange Tree conspiracies, in Ribbon outrages and Fenian risings, in French and Italian insurrections in the great year of revolutions, 1848, in the *Coup d'état* of 1851, or the ferocious terrorism of the Commune of Paris twenty years later. In the main these things are but the crimes and errors of the wicked or mistaken that turn eventually to the profit of Humanity. In no way do they affect the title of the century to be regarded as pre-eminently an era of hope and

enterprise that has actually witnessed the reconstruction of the whole fabric of society on the democratic basis of the European Revolution which, in its primary intention, its purer aims and objects, was not a work of anarchy and negation, but a *positive* Christian production, a solemn manifestation of the *individual* man, and therefore a political translation of the ideas of right, liberty, fraternity, which it was the mission of the Protestant revolution to achieve.\* The essential spirit of the age cannot be said to have completely incarnated itself in the events noted above. And it would be a daring thing to maintain that the essence of the eighteenth century is to be found in the terrible events in France known in history as the Revolution of Thermidor in the Year II., or,—again to appeal to our own annals,—in the riots against meeting-houses in Sacheverell's time, or the hideous outbreak of fanaticism against papists and their abettors in Lord George Gordon's time, or the Church-and-King riots in the time of Dr Priestley. For everywhere there was apparent, in spite of revolutions, corruptions, and sectarian violences, a genuine zeal for the improvement of human life. Indeed the period embraced by the death of Dryden (1700) and the publication of Campbell's didactic poem *The Pleasures of Hope* (1799), which rang in the new century with a noble aspiration embodied in words of touching and penetrative music,—

\* See Mazzini, *Essays* ("Faith and the Future") 1887, p. 23.

Ye that the rising morn invidious mark,  
 And hate the light, because your deeds are dark ;  
 Ye that expanding truth invidious view,  
 And think, or wish, the song of Hope untrue ; . . .  
 Tyrants ! in vain ye trace the wizard ring ;  
 In vain ye limit Mind's unwearied spring.—

may be said to have been, in all its central and highest moments of passionate insight, a period of advance and ascension towards new possibilities of knowledge and new conceptions of beauty and goodness and love. Nor can it be denied that Burns, fired by the passion of a living conflict, and stimulated to creative effort in the cause of humanity by the vivid interest of undetermined issues, largely contributed, as a poet-politician powerful on the unenfranchised masses of men, to give to his era its valid and indisputable claim to be regarded as *the* age in which humanity first distinctly perceived the possibilities and conditions of mature human existence. Than *Scots wha hae* and *Auld Langsyne* what nobler contributions could be wished to the true liberty of noble patriotism and universal brotherhood? In all he said or did about this time he influenced the thought and action of his age, and gave new force and fire to the long-continued agitation for Reform which culminated in the mighty democratic triumphs of 1832.

So far then from being the trivial, sceptical, destructive period that its critics represent it to be,

the eighteenth century as a whole was an era of manly and humane effort, of spiritual growth and expansion, of distinct and creative impulse and achievement. Earnest men never think in vain, even though in some respects their thoughts be errors. It may be that the rights of the individual were more considered, even in the poetry of Burns, than the duties of man as a member of society. Perhaps the century sadly miscalculated the difficulties of the work of political reformation on which it entered with so light a heart. And in some cases no doubt it strangely undervalued the social problems which it strove to solve in a spirit of such artless benevolence. But we owe to it ideals of duty and even visions of moral perfection which lay beyond the imagination of other times. It certainly did away with the tyranny of aristocracies, the soul-cramping invention of priests; and lifted from overburdened hearts the deadly pressure of iniquitous laws. The time was full of robust sense and good fellowship and a spiritual enthusiasm that thrilled through the world "as if," in Hegel's words, "the reconciliation between the divine and the secular was then first accomplished." I question, indeed, if any age was ever more anxious for lofty truths, more quick to discover them, more ardent in embracing them. And of no sage or singer of that era could it be said with greater propriety that he "was quick to learn and wise to know"

than of Burns who built "a princely throne on humble truth;" and, by virtue of his penetrative insight and direct sincerity of inspiration and vigour of virile grasp on the realities of contemporary life, now holds a sovereign place in its literary annals as the greatest Optimist of the modern world.

## VII.

THESE observations naturally lead to the more direct consideration of the general literary outcome of the epoch. And at the outset I am free to admit that the literature of the eighteenth century was greatly over-valued by those who lived in it. This applies specially to the poetry of the period from 1700 to 1730, long venerated as the Augustan Age of English Literature,—a title, however, which the present century has refused to sanction. But if the contemporaries and immediate successors of Pope and Addison over-valued the achievements of the Queen Anne men, it is equally certain that the general literature of that period, and of the eighteenth century as a whole, has been greatly undervalued in our own day. These conflicting estimates are easily explained. On the one hand, it is true that the Popian age in its pursuit of regular form, subdued thought, and chastened ornament, had reached a crowning pitch of polish, refinement, and



didactic coldness. In this sense then there was much to justify the dignified appellation which it coveted and claimed. The Augustan age of Rome was its prototype, its model, as regards correctness of style and formal symmetry of method, albeit the masterpieces of Virgil and Horace are as far above the efforts made to emulate them, as Virgil and Horace were themselves in character and genius removed above Pope and Addison. Then again, on the other hand, it is true that Pope's predecessors in the era of Elizabeth and his great successors in the Georgian age far outstripped the eighteenth century classicists in all those higher qualities of intellectual beauty and all those deeper and more potent elements of literary style which awaken the fullest critical enthusiasm. By general consent the Shakespeare-Jonson period with its exquisite audacities of thought and fancy in which we discover the rich warm colour and strong fibre and tempestuous vitality of Renaissance life, or the Burns-Wordsworth era with its unmasked romantic fervour and genuine nature-worship, or the Byron-Scott epoch with its speculative and heroic sentiment and swinging and dashing lyric force, surpass both the period of Queen Anne and Augustus in all the more universally impressive qualities of poetic art.

And when we leave the classical and rhetorical poetry of Pope, from which our notion of the literary

character of the first half of the century is chiefly derived, and regard the whole period as portioned off into three successive stages—the reign of Anne and of her successor ; the reign of George II. ; and the reign of George III.—one is obliged to admit that, in spite of their picturesqueness of touch and sustained richness of phrase, the literary achievements of eighteenth-century England from 1744 to 1780 show a condition of general mediocrity. The efforts of Thomson and Gray, of Collins and a few others, are only brilliant exceptions that prove the rule. Attention is concentrated on copying and recopying academic conventionalities ; and the personal impression and observation of nature—what Cowper and Burns restored to poetry—are neglected for the unreal imitation of ancient classical art and the acquisition of a close and ornate style. In short the poetry of the period indicated above is narrow in range, petty in intent, ephemeral in interest ; with more of polish than of power, more of intelligence than genius,—a thing that displays in its literary suppleness and refinement, its smoothness and glitter, less of Arcadia's own god Pan than of Apollo. Indeed it may be said that the salient characteristic of eighteenth-century literature in general is its studied quiescence or the music of its cadenced and tranquil phrases. Before the advent of Cowper and Burns in whom the fiery enthusiasms of older days reappeared, the temper of the whole age was cold

and artificial, dissatisfied and dogmatic. It was broadly speaking an age of repression and of compromise between extremes, political as well as literary ; its aim being, in letters as in life, to make an impressive apotheosis of polite pretence, and to please rationally by means of classical urbanity.

And yet it must not be forgotten that literary criticism in England, commencing with the Restoration and Dryden's famous prefaces, and passing through Thomas Rymer (1638-1713)—the first English critic who literally split himself on the impregnable rock of Shakespeare—and John Dennis (1657-1734)—the rugged Appius of Pope's satire, to whom, however, belongs the more enviable distinction of being the first to do justice to the sublime merits of Milton—received in this era some of its most noteworthy contributions ; first from Shaftesbury (1671-1713) and Addison (1672-1719), and, after the age of Anne was over, from Lord Kames (1696-1782) and Bishop Hurd (1720-1808), from Dr Johnson (1709-1784) and the poet Gray (1716-1771). With the finer contemporary work of Matthew Arnold or Walter Pater in mind, much of this criticism now appears dull, empirical, even fatuous,—as when Gray sneers at the ability of Shaftesbury or Johnson speaks of Milton as wearisome ; but it has usually a note of distinction, especially in the case of Dennis and Addison, which conciliates and disarms. In the

writings of these men the personal accent is dominant ; their criticism is the deliberate expression of genuine individuality ; and so far reflects the peculiar reforming spirit of the time. In other words, it was pre-eminently a critical and controversial age in which the task allotted to poets and thinkers was chiefly that of attack or defence ; a fact amply attested even by the polemical poetry of Burns which perpetuates the tradition established in an earlier generation by the personal invective of Pope's verse and the pungent prose satires of Swift.

In every department old principles and deep-rooted convictions were peremptorily called in question. Philosophy acknowledged no higher motive than utility, although even then, thanks to the imagination and spiritualizing touch of Berkeley (1684-1753),—the most polished prose writer of his age and one of the most formidable assailants of the deistic positions,—a new spirit was stirring the time uneasily to larger and more humane issues which were helped forward by the sceptical theories of Hume (1711-1776), the leader of the utilitarians, in which we not only discover side by side with a sincere enmity to "Whig strokes" and popular government, the germs of free trade and other doctrines of the existing school of political economy, but those higher principles without which the philosophies of Kant and Reid would never have been, and the sensationalism of Locke and the

materialism of Condillac, his logical successor, would still be reigning triumphant over Europe. But whilst Hume gave philosophy "a new impulse and direction" and his speculations have since enlarged and ennobled the whole world of thought, the religious consciousness of the epoch was not roused from its apathy and dulness. He helped to summon to life things that had been dead or sleeping; but he did not stimulate regard for those objects of presumptive sacredness with which permanent feelings have associated themselves. The publication of his *Treatise of Human Nature* five years before Pope's death, whilst marking the turning-point of his own career, did not, at least immediately, affect the spiritual tides of passion and of thought. Religious speculations tended as of old towards scepticism as in the Deists, towards a closer and severer puritanism as in the Methodists, towards a more stringent conservative reaction as in the Evangelicals.\* In all quarters, before and after 1739, the literature of the period is specially noteworthy for its mechanical decoction and concoction of religious ideas. The art of expressing these, whether in prose or poetry, in marvellously impressive language is undeniable, if the ideas themselves are mediocre, though I am free to confess that the *Essay on Man*, in which Pope poetised Bolingbroke's scheme

\* Cf. Raymond S. Perrin, *Religion of Philosophy* Part i., chap. vi.; and Gosse *History of Eighteenth Century Literature* pp. 395-6.

of deistical metaphysics, seems to convey a deeper and more impressive sense of God's unfathomable greatness than *Paradise Lost* itself. It has to be remarked, however, that the rationalism of the English Church did little to stimulate or inflame an effective enthusiasm in the hearts and minds of the orthodox. For, although the century gave us Butler (1692-1751), the typical Christian protagonist of his time, whose object in preparing that sagacious digest of the deist controversy *The Analogy of Religion* was avowedly "not to vindicate the character of God, but to show the obligations of men; not to justify His providence, but to show what belongs to us to do," it cannot be denied that all attempts to construct a consistent scheme of natural religion broke down, and left Hume at the end of the century master of the situation, so far as theology and metaphysics were concerned. In point of fact it is not in Butler, the ablest of the Christian apologists, but in Paley (1743-1805), whose utilitarian ethics were practically a return to the moral theories of Hobbes which resolved all human impulses regarding right and wrong into self-love, that we discover the best representative example of the sapless mathematical manner of the age in its later phases of polemical pamphleteering.

And this leads us back by no forced transition to the poetic literature of the period. In a general

survey of English poetry from 1600 to 1780—from the age of Dryden, when common sense reigned, to the age of Pope, when convention and artificiality were triumphant, onwards to the age of Johnson, in which the same spirit was still at work but in decadence—there are two things which specially strike one. The first is, that unlike the Elizabethan epoch, poetic art in the eighteenth century is no longer paramount, though the personal prestige of certain poets is almost as great as that of Shakespeare or Spenser before the Restoration: it is subordinated to prose and no longer dominates the imaginative life of men's souls. It is no longer the chosen vehicle for unsophisticated emotion and feeling, but for antithetical thought and reasoned conviction. This opens up to us the second noteworthy thing. Poetry either loses its elasticity and the genuine vision of an earlier time in a harmony too mechanically studied,—in a mathematical music that touches the ear with melodious words rather than the heart with poignant emotion,—or it wins its greatest triumphs in didactic discussion deliberately undertaken to display ingenuities and paradoxical turns of thought. It is an age of reason—critical but conventional, didactic yet artificial. Sincerity, simplicity, and salience of presentation give place to formality, epigrammatic force and finish, and polite pretence that faithfully reflects the social medium of the time. It is true that there are poets after Pope and before Burns who, possessing the

inspiration that the classicists lack, mean greatly, and in the exercise of their noble art soar to the highest heaven of invention. Beattie, Thomson, Gray, and Collins are men of lofty sentiment and chivalrous devotion who delight in the physiognomy and movement of the external world; and have besides that inner eye of love and faith which draws from the visible things around them an intuition of things not seen. They are heralds and harbingers of the coming dawn of naturalism. In their work—and especially in Thomson's—we have, it is true, an apotheosis of the powers of nature, a tendency to unreal impersonation, which shows that they have not quite escaped the insipid traditionalism of the classicists, or discarded the sentimental costume of the sham idyllists. The same thing is noticeable, no doubt, though less marked with unreality of feeling, in our early Scottish writers, such as Dunbar and Douglas, in whom, however, the classical and medieval style of feeling and art were naturally predominant, so that their habitual use of classical terms appears fresh, suggestive, and, in a sense, quite appropriate. Traces of it are also to be found in the writings of Burns himself, whose classical nomenclature,—witness his Cynthia's and Castalia's—necessarily less grounded on reality of feeling than that of Dunbar, is obviously derived from the verse of Young and Shenstone. But this defect must not be too closely pressed. What calls for special mention



is that we have in the work of these successors of Pope a promise of that fuller-reaching utterance with which other poets between 1786 and 1805 were destined to enrich the world. Nevertheless, they are, as I have said, exceptions. Compared with the romantic and naturalistic art of Cowper and Burns and Wordsworth who sum up the past and initiate a new era, the poetry of such men as Johnson and Churchill, and even of Goldsmith who revived the manner of Pope, is essentially a thing more of form than matter; of melody of rhythm and elegance of phrase and symmetry of parts, rather than rich fancy or fervid emotion or deep-probing and illuminating wisdom. It wants not merely the clear morning note, the cool serenity and noble sweetness of the robust Elizabethans who celebrated a homely country life as one of sweet content, or the simplicity, *naïveté*, and nobility of the early seventeenth-century singers from whom the gradual development of the mighty tree of naturalism is distinctly traceable, but it lacks the romance, the spirituality, and the vital mystery of those later efforts of the Georgian age which from their freshness, simplicity, and subtlety seem to be rather the productions of nature than of man. It never reaches the high spheres of poetry attained by Cowper in *The Task* in which the poet pours out his inmost feelings in praise of country life as most friendly to piety and virtue, without one single note of that false Arcadianism which is

noticeable in the sham-pastorals of Pope, or the artificial bucolic performances of Philips in which there is not a vestige of the close and loving observation of nature that forms the distinctive attribute of the Theocritean mind which shows itself so conspicuously in the pastoral poetry of his Scottish contemporary Allan Ramsay. Nor does it ever reach the heights attained by Burns in his masterpiece of *Tam o' Shanter* where he rises into the regions of the allegoric and supernatural by the strength of a creative imagination that brings him into close affinity with Chaucer ; or by Wordsworth when, in moments of meditative trance, he produces the flawless *Laodamia*, or the solemn *Thanksgiving Ode*, or the *Lines Written at Tintern Abbey* in 1798 in which we have reflections of the mystical thought of Benedict Spinoza. These are poems that lift the common aspirations and sympathies of humankind to a purer region and a wider reach of view. They have no parallel in the productions of the superseded school whose chief exponents subordinated passion and truth to "the trade of classic niceties," and sacrificed simplicity and sense for dubiously legitimate ornament and flourish.

Poets like Thomson and Shenstone have not, as Burns has, the supreme qualities that distinguish the *Dii Majores* of the lyre ; and Gray and Collins, composing in the classic spirit, and lavishing their

exquisite minuteness of detail upon Nature only to point their moral reflections upon human life, are not High Priests and Hierophants of Nature as Wordsworth is. They have little of imagination in the purely Wordsworthian sense ; little of the mystery and spirituality, and power to discern what is deep and essential in nature. But they helped to redeem the aging century from the general charge of feebleness and insipidity. Their feeling for nature is still acknowledged to be refining, unselfish, ennobling. And much of the grace and charm of modern poetry is undoubtedly traceable to it. Cowper, for instance, derives much of the symmetry, much of the strength of his descriptive art, from the noble lyrical work of his immediate predecessors. In spite of their narrowness and restraint, they impress and influence the fuller and freer nature of Burns' who, in *The Vision*, laments the inability of his own genius

To paint with Thomson's landscape glow ;  
 Or wake the bosom-melting throe,  
     With Shenstone's art ;  
 Or pour, with Gray, the moving flow  
     Warm on the heart.

And although the light of the inner sanctuary of nature that pierced with strange and sudden gleams the mystic deeps of Wordsworth's soul never dawned upon them, they painted nature in some of her most engaging moods and did something, as Burns himself did, to quicken the subtler vision of the great Pan

of the Lakes to perceive not only the bright, wide, God-given world that lay beyond the shaded groves of Alfoxden or the treeless heights of Westmoreland, but, in moments of passionate intuition or exceptional insight, what is deepest and most essential in nature,—the brooding power of a universal spirit, and

The light that never was on sea or land.

To read for the first time the poems of Cowper with their penetrative pathos and precise and vivid incidents, or the lyrics of Burns which show a kind of rapt enthusiasm for nature and an exceptional susceptibility to the impressions of eye and ear, or the pastoral poems of Wordsworth with their clear and delicate outlinings of visible imagery and their subtle suggestions of the "beauty still more beautiful" that lies beyond the bounded present, is like a day spent in a strange, passionate, pastoral world, new and "bright as at creation's day," of which we get no image or reflection whatever in the poetry of Pope and Parnell, and but little even in the poetry of Thomson and Gray, who move, however, "immersed in rich foreshadowings" of a future of higher reach and fuller power.\*

### VIII.

LOOKING then in a comprehensive way at the poetic

\* Parnell, however, has occasionally something of Wordsworthian mystery; a genuine, if limited, insight into the spirit of the outward world—the soul of nature—that is, strictly speaking, premonitory of *The Prelude* of Wordsworth.

literature of the eighteenth century one may discern in its gradual movement towards a genuine interpretation of nature and of life, four clearly-marked stages of evolution which in our present study we may find it both convenient and accurate to recognise. There is, first, the age of Dryden (1631-1700) in which common sense reigns, and cold rational systems of ethical conduct replace the fiery enthusiasms and tempestuous vitality of the pre-Restoration epoch. There is, secondly, the age of Pope (1688-1744) in which the morality-preaching tendency increases, and English poetry, influenced by the pedantic rules of Lebossu and Boileau and the artificial life which Louis XIV. had made fashionable, either applies itself to an unreal imitation of ancient classical art, or, governed by a desire to attain perfection of form—terseness and neatness, epigrammatic force and musical flow—exhausts its vital powers in an endeavour to assimilate beauties of thought and style derived from France. Then we have, thirdly, the age of Johnson (1709-1784) in which the peculiar impulse of the primary poets of the Classical Renaissance—Pope and Prior, Parnell and Philips—is visibly worn-out, or reappears fitfully in a succession of minor minstrels who feebly endeavour to perpetuate the scholastic traditions of the Popian era. And, lastly, there is the age of Cowper (1731-1800) in which the type of poetry which Pope domesticated and a mob of mannerists afterwards made ridiculous, passes into a degeneracy of classicism that

holds out no promise of resurrection, and the inventive genius of the nation is diverted into new channels. Pseudo-classicism is replaced by the vigorous expression of independent thought. Art becomes the undying exponent of national life. And that poetical dynasty which had dethroned the inspired successors of Spenser and Shakespeare is, in its turn, overthrown by the nature-loving poets of the Georgian age.

And to be sensible of the sudden decadence of poetry after 1660, one has only to compare even the least distinguished work of Milton (1608-1674) with the best work of Dryden, one of the great precursors of the Classical School, or of Pope, its chief ornament and exemplar, or of Johnson in whom the old conventional feigning still lingers. In Milton there is always a lofty tone even where inadequacy of thought is most observable. But in Dryden there is audacity or buoyant self-assertion in lieu of loftiness. His task is not to justify the ways of God to men, but to explain and prove the arguments and insults of sects and factions. He does not introduce new phases of thought; he simply adapts existing material to an Anglo-classic taste; and polishes the surface of narrative and didactic poetry which had been in vogue since the time of Chaucer. He attempts a compromise between classical eloquence and romantic truth; but there are no graceful embodiments of delicate observation in his vigorous verse. Wordsworth, indeed, has remarked of him that there is not "a single image

from nature in the whole body of his works." In Pope again you have correctness and clarity of style, purity of music and some graceful indulgence in passing moods of tender sentiment. But there is no lyric depth, no true sublimity, no music of poetry that speaks directly to the heart. And in Johnson there is the gravity of a moralist ; but his deep and solemn tone of sentiment has a tendency to pomposity, and his sonorous and swelling periods are in the heavy, classical, artificial-natural style of the poets of the decadence. They are disagreeably monotonous ; wholly unredeemed by the *naïveté* and spontaneity of the old masters whom he imitated. He regards poetry almost exclusively from the moral and logical point of view. Hence even this sesquipedalian dictator whom M. Taine has not inaptly described as at once the La Harpe and the Boileau of eighteenth-century England, is seen to be the slave of the age of prose and reason. He occupies indeed the central place in the school of didactic poetry which was originated—at least nominally—by Pope, and closed by Goldsmith (1728-1774), whose sweet and wholesome verse, however, gives an agreeable intimation that we are already approaching the period of Cowper and Burns, in whom we discover the realisation of that pure symbolism of human life and emotion in the natural world which attained its perfection in the poetry of Wordsworth (1770-1850), than whom no singer is more truly akin to Milton in loftiness of imagination and austere purity of thought.

The greatness of literary art, let us remember, depends not on form but on the quality of the matter which informs and controls. Beauty is the central literary excellence of poetry ; but that in the final analysis is found to consist in fineness of truth and depth of vision. Tried then by this rule the poetry of the eighteenth century may be called *good* art, but it can never with justice be styled *great* art. And the reasonableness of this position will at once appear if we again pass in review the stages of development indicated above. Milton, you will observe, shows a serious concern for moral and psychological truth, for logical coherency, for imaginative distinctness and definiteness. He has a message to deliver ; and to this his entire art-faculty is subordinated. He is possessed by his theme which is of more importance than artistic success and felicity, or the correctness and purism of the mere scholar. His duty is avowedly that of interpreter between God and the world ; and therefore his language involves translation from inward to outward. In spite of the inborn music of the man he is no lover of words for their own sake. It is part of Milton's mental constitution that everything "runs up into infinity"; to God's Spirit he looks for inspiration that he "may see and tell of things invisible to mortal sight"; and hence in the sublime invocation of *Paradise Lost* he appears not as a self-conscious author, but as the passive medium or mouthpiece of the eternal Spirit of truth and wisdom :—



O spirit, that dost prefer  
 Before all temples the upright heart and pure,  
 Instruct me, for thou know'st; thou from the first  
 Wast present, and, with mighty wings outspread,  
 Dove-like sat'st brooding on the vast abyss,  
 And mad'st it pregnant: what in me is dark,  
 Illumine; what is low, raise and support;  
 That to the height of this great argument  
 I may assert eternal Providence,  
 And justify the ways of God to men.

But in Dryden who succeeds him there is no such inspiration, and no such message to deliver. He is regarded as the greatest poet in English literature between Milton and Wordsworth; and yet it is with this dainty morsel of folly and extravagance that he makes his *debut*:—

His body was an orb, his sublime soul  
 Did move on Virtue's and on learning's pole;  
 . . . Come, learned Ptolemy, and trial make  
 If thou this hero's altitude canst take.  
 . . . Blisters with pride swell'd, which through's flesh did sprout  
 Like rose-buds, stuck i' the lily skin about.  
 Each little pimple had a tear in it,  
 To wail the fault its rising did commit. . . .  
 Or were these gens sent to adorn his skin,  
 The cabinet of a richer soul within?  
 No comet need foretel his change drew on  
 Whose corpse might seem a constellation.\*

Strictly speaking these lines, written on the youthful Lord Hastings who died of smallpox, are not episodic. They furnish a fairly typical example of the singular

\* See Dryden's *Works*, ed. Sir Walter Scott, 1821, xi. p. 94.

*concelli* and wild flights of fancy which characterise the new poetry of the age that Dryden dominates. In his hands the subject begins to lower and the verse becomes more and more of first account.

And with Pope this phase attains its highest development. His mind is not one that overflows with thoughts either of heaven or earth; and consequently his verse has nothing of the soul of humanity in it. The rapture of friendship, the sentiment of personal devotion, the passion of love "that sways the sun and all the stars"—these are things for which you look in vain. And there is nothing of that appreciative insight into the higher harmonies of nature or that delight in the familiar aspects of the world of sense which breathes through all the greatest poetry from Homer to Lucretius, from Chaucer to Swinburne. The music of the spheres has never caught Pope's ear; and he has no prophetic burden to deliver beyond that compressed within these six lines of the *Essay on Man*, the last of which expresses aphoristically the mechanical deism of his age:—

All nature is but art, unknown to thee;  
All chance, direction, which thou canst not see;  
All discord, harmony not understood;  
All partial evil, universal good:  
And, spite of pride, in erring reason's spite,  
One truth is clear, Whatever is, is right.

Beauty of expression is with him the be-all and the end-all. And thus the art of song in England changes

from the inspired message of Milton's time to the "elaborate chime of words" with which Pope, who made himself the poetic standard of the middle period, enchanted and enthralled mankind. The art of combining words with subtlety and exactitude reaches its highest point. No contemporary or successor attains the height of the master-metrist; and in 1774 the school of Pope comes to an end.

And then the moment of re-creation and the re-establishment of discredited ideals arrives with Cowper who stands as the mediator between the old feeling and the new. In his notions of poetry, in his own intentions as a poetic artist, he is a Pre-Drydenist. One of his avowed characteristics is a superior relish for the older poets, especially for Milton whom he studied closely and with increasing admiration. This appears from *Table Talk*, the first and most attractive of his moral satires, in which he sketches the past and future of poetry. In the Past he tells us poetry was

Elegant as simplicity, and warm  
 As ecstasy, unmanacled by form,—  
 Not prompted, as in our degenerate days,  
 By low ambition and the thirst of praise,  
 Was natural as is the flowing stream,  
 And yet magnificent, a God the theme.

And then in allusion to the hard glitter of Pope, his antagonism to which forms the chief connecting

link with the poetic outcome of the previous age, he says—

But he (his musical finesse was such,  
So nice his ear, so delicate his touch)  
Made poetry a mere mechanic art,  
And every warbler has his tune by heart.

And finally, he forecasts the future destinies of poetry, proclaims his own predestined use and function,—just as Burns in *The Vision* idealises the aims of his life and the spirit of his poetry—and harmonizes his own with Milton's muse ;—

Pity Religion has so seldom found  
A skilful guide into poetic ground ! . . .  
The shelves are full, all other themes are sped,  
Hackneyed and worn to the last flimsy thread ;  
Satire has long since done his best, and curst  
And loathsome Ribaldry has done his worst ;  
Fancy has sported all her powers away  
In tales, in trifles, and in children's play ;  
And 'tis the sad complaint, and almost true,  
Whate'er we write, we bring forth nothing new.  
'Twere new indeed to see a bard all fire,  
'Touched with a coal from heaven, assume the lyre,  
And tell the world, still kindling as he sung,  
With more than mortal music on his tongue,  
That He who died below, and reigns above,  
Inspires the song, and that His name is Love.

The offspring of the Religious Revival which marked the latter part of the eighteenth century in England, and in this way associated with Wesley its chief apostle and with Whitefield its greatest preacher, Cowper is also the herald and announcing sign of the New

Revival in poetic art, and thus touches on one side Oliver Goldsmith, and on the other Robert Burns who, in the later years of his life, made *The Task* the companion of his solitary rambles through the wilds of Nithsdale. And naturally enough since, as has been pointed out, these illustrious contemporaries had much in common—the same simplicity and love of nature, the same deep unfailing sympathy with the suffering poor, the same pride and pathos, and the same alliance of humour and satire with the most painful sensibilities of a melancholy genius.\* But what calls for special mention here is that Cowper's *Table Talk* appeared in 1782, and within four years of its publication there was given to the world, in the Kilmarnock *Poems* of 1786, the *Cottar's Saturday Night* which breathes the spirit and conforms to the ideal of Burns's admiring contemporary as set forth in the lines quoted above. It is one of the noblest first-fruits of the religious and literary revival of the epoch. And when Burns in the penultimate stanza of that exquisite idyl thus sings:—

O Scotia! my dear, my native soil!  
 For whom my warmest wish to Heaven is sent!  
 Long may thy hardy sons of rustic toil  
 Be blest with health, and peace, and sweet content!  
 And, oh, may Heaven their simple lives prevent  
 From luxury's contagion, weak and vile;  
 Then, how'er crowns and coronets be rent,  
 A virtuous populace may rise the while,  
 And stand a wall of fire around their much-lov'd Isle—

\* See Lockhart *Life of Burns* p. 211.

can it be doubted that, in spite of the sterile dogma of the Auld Lights and the levity and superficiality of the New, he came powerfully under the influence of the deep stern piety of the time, and that, as a social propagandist who assailed the cant and hypocrisy, the conventionality and hollow pretension of the age, that influence remained with him to the end?

### IX.

THE art of the so-called Classical Period which extends, roughly speaking, from the Restoration of the Stuarts to the French Revolution, is thus seen to exhibit the same principle of conservative evolution that distinguishes Renaissance art. It passes through a similar series of literary crises or metamorphoses, and at last crystallises into new and higher forms. It has its destined evolution from a germ, its given stock of energy, its limited supply of vital force. It is born with Waller (1605-1687) who, in 1623, strikes the first note of classicism in English poetry;\* with Denham (1615-1658), his first disciple, and a vigorous but ungrammatical writer of the old lyric school, who adopts the neatly-balanced style of heroic distich-writing; and with Dryden, in whom the new versification and didactic

\* In a complimentary piece called *His Majesty's Escape at St Andrews*, which foreshadows all the distinctive qualities of Augustan verse—the precise prosody of Dryden, the compressed energy and shrewd verbal aptness of Pope's antithetical numbers. See Ward's *English Poets*, ii., 271 and 275.

manner become dominant, as already noted. It develops with the writers who appear in the reign of Queen Anne, and especially under the influence of the arch-versifier Pope, from whom it receives its authority, completion, and splendour, although, as I have just indicated, he is in reality the Raphael and not the Perugino of eighteenth-century convention and the new mechanic art of rhyming. After being partially transformed by Thomson and Gray, it declines and decomposes in the reign of George II., on the death of Goldsmith, whose old plain pathos and neat and gay simplicity had gradually lightened the deadness and dulness of didacticism and provided an easy mode of transition from the classic to the natural school. And thus just as the pistillate plant, chance-sown in the crannied wall of some mouldering temple of man's highest art, may in the act of decaying and dying deposit among the ruins the germ of a higher and richer life, so in the moment of efflorescent decadence the half-effaced poetry of the eighteenth century mingles with new elements and transmits a germinal principle to the sound and living poetry that succeeds.

The beginning of the ninth decade of the century saw the final liberation of English art from the trammels of traditionalism and conventionality. And perhaps there is nothing of its kind more notable in our literary annals than the fact that the sweeping

change was effected by a pensive being like Cowper, who was born to be a recluse and had no real acquaintance with men or broad experience of life. The man who turned with deepest love to nature in her common aspects and initiated a movement which found its fullest development in Wordsworth and Keats, was a poet of weak character, unsteady mind, and mournful temperament; a cloistered self-accusing pietist who displayed all the austere prejudices of a nature essentially sectarian and ascetic. Sick in soul and body, tormented almost continually by the demon of religious monomania, and with nothing but the flat uninteresting scenery of the English fens to stimulate his fancy, Cowper was destined to become the great regenerator of the national poetry, and, in a sense, the embodiment of all the intellectual forces which were then secretly working towards the evolution of modern England. It was this timid, lonely, half-feminine figure who triumphed over the artificial boundaries which had been raised about his art, who swept aside the arbitrary rules and symbols that had ceased to have any meaning; and, boldly returning to nature and vernacular truth,—thus serving himself heir to the old poets of the greater ages and the homely vigorous English that they had handled so effectively,—brought the day of critical and so-called classical poetry to an end.\* It is no doubt true that even Cowper in his first poetic essays followed

\* See Leslie Stephen *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century*, ii., 450. Cf. Ward *ut supra*, iii., 426.



in the conventional path. His early diction is Latin and rhetorical; in which respect he resembles his predecessor Thomson, who was nevertheless the first English writer who made Nature the staple of his verse, and whose *Seasons*, in spite of the prevalent Latinisms in language and construction, still keeps its hold on the popular mind independently of the purer naturalism of Cowper and Burns, or the more perfect romantic style of Scott and the Lakists. And yet the *Table Talk* series of moral satires (1782) in which Cowper assailed the practical sins of his age and criticised a world seen only "through the loopholes of retreat," and whose ordinary air he had not breathed for ten long years, stands, strictly speaking, at the opposite pole to the pseudo-classic form which Pope had attempted to fix and nationalise.

It is not to be supposed again that an innovation like that made by him in *The Task* (1784)—"a glorious poem," Burns called it in a letter to Mrs Dunlop of 1795, albeit he deprecated its "scraps of Calvinistic divinity,"—commanded the immediate and undivided suffrages of a generation that spoke of the fluent but feeble lyric strains of Anna Seward as second only to the hymns and elegies of Sappho, and enthusiastically accepted such twinkling tapers as Darwin and Hayley,—the tumid Lucretius and the turgid Juvenal of the dreary epoch of amatorious gush and gumflowers and metrical sing-song — as

stars of the first magnitude in the literary firmament. And yet this poem, in which he defied the precedents of the past and scorned its models, may be said to have marked the re-birth of poetry in England. It determined the national taste toward the romantic rather than the classic type of art, and threw open the doors of poetry to the new generation that arose, when Cowper's own star was towards its setting, with Burns and Wordsworth and Scott, who turned back from the monotonous jingle and mock-heroics of the early eighteenth-century Humanists to the bolder and simpler beauty of the Renaissance naturalists. In a word, the tentative and maturer efforts of Cowper alike show him in possession of a new style, peculiar to himself, representative of his own temperament, and destined by its simplicity, attractiveness, and fidelity to nature to revolutionise the practice of his precursors and contemporaries. He opened the eyes and widened the thoughts of his countrymen; and, by "bringing back the eye to the object" and the object to the eye, taught them to discern in the humblest and most unexpected forms the presence of certain latent affinities between nature and the human mind. I regard him, therefore, not merely as a protester against the conventional fervour of much of the poetry popular in his own time, but as the true forerunner of that deeper and more passionate poetry which was to follow in a time of still greater mental activity. In Cowper we

have the flowers and the leaves ; in Burns and Wordsworth the fruit and seed.

It is possible, however, to draw too large an inference from this last statement. For what shapes itself for criticism as the main phenomenon of the new poetry is the depth of the note of revolt in it. And, having regard to his own unambitious conception of the poet's function, and his singular career of religious asceticism and perpetual self-study, — a natural temperament, not unlike Rousseau's, that certainly qualified him for becoming the great poet of the religious revival which marked the latter part of the century, but one that as certainly unfitted him for taking a part in the everyday debate of the world—it is impossible to think of Cowper as anything more than the very mildest of all the precursors of the Revolution. There are no heights of tragic vehemence in his puritanical verse, and little of passionate sentiment and emotion. It is mainly, almost entirely, reflective and observant. His genius gives a perfectly real and unexaggerated expression of an uncomplicated and, comparatively speaking, low level of true human feeling. He seeks no adventitious aid from those passing events which stimulate to creative effort the more supreme and impassioned genius of a Coleridge or a Wordsworth. The rising spirit of the time, it is true, speaks even from Cowper's solitude ; as when, four years before

its fall, he denounces the Bastille, or when, again, he expresses in *The Task* the feeling caught by his sensitive mind from the gloom of bondage and sense of oppression that pervaded Europe, and exclaims

My ear is pained,  
My soul is sick, with every day's report  
Of wrong and outrage with which earth is filled.

But these expressions reveal only a transient mood, and the revolutionary note is dull and muffled. He holds himself aloof from the fate of empires and the issues of political events. He is chiefly concerned with Wesley's reaction against formalism in religion; and his business as poet-teacher is avowedly to wean the world from worldliness to God in the spirit of the great founder of Methodism. The drums and tramlings of the century do not, therefore, as in Burns's spirited songs and ballads, echo in his homely and unpretending strains. We only get from these, when not directed against conventions in town or church, the peaceful music of familiar rural sounds—the rhythmical babble around mossy stones of the sluggish waters of “the slow-winding Ouse;” the harmonies of thrush and blackbird that float with eddying sounds through the Throckmorton elm-thickets; or the dissonance created by the postboy twanging his horn across the bridge of dull and fenny Huntingdon. Cowper stirs our sensations and our thoughts, and employs words to mark elementary emotions or

stimulate our recognition of local sanctities. But Burns does this and something more : he invariably compels the mind to combat and discussion. Cowper's joys are neither heroic nor masculine : Burns's are almost habitually those of an Alcæus "singing amidst the clash of arms." The one, sheltering himself from the agitations of the outward world, exhibits the passionless calm of pastoral life ; the other, mixing freely with the contentious and bustling life and movement of an age of revolt and resurrection, embodies the passionate sincerity and revolutionary ardours, the strange reminiscences and forebodings of that stormy epoch, and yet remains the poet of homely human nature and the peaceful pastoralism of the Scottish Lowlands.

It is in Burns, therefore, and not in Cowper that the distinctive qualities of the artistic revolt are most vividly realised. In its broader aspects the change which took place in literature was the direct result of that yearning after the unattainable which took shape in the European Revolution. And of that movement Cowper,—an unrevolutionary Whig, who followed Thomson as a close observer and truthful painter of nature,—was, as we have seen, a precursor only in the sense in which Dryden, following Waller, was a precursor of the Classical School. Considered as a link in the chain of our national literature, his verse is of less importance than has been commonly

supposed. Cowper's ideas are not of that vital kind which go to produce great poetry. Neither are they in strict harmony with the facts of the world, as Burns's are seen to be more and more as the years go on. In some of his poems—notably *The Shrubbery*, and the verses *To a Young Lady*—there are faint foreshadowings of Byron and Wordsworth; notes of tenderness and pathos which live anew in the richer and deeper chords of the *Hebrew Melodies* or the *Lyrical Ballads*. His fresh revelation of Nature supplies poetic nutriment even to minds quite alien from his own. Burns himself shows traces of the influence of his great contemporary. But there is nothing of the lyrical depth and dramatic passion of the great Revolution poets in Cowper. His soul is in sympathy with the forces of humanity in movement after freedom; but even when, as in the Bastille passage referred to above, he expresses the revolutionary spirit of the time, his verse is altogether devoid of those qualities of strength and elasticity, of elemental sweep and energy, which distinguish the productions of Burns and Byron, the master-types of passionate revolt and defiant independence. In the sense, therefore, in which I am now writing, his poetry cannot be said to be closely affiliated to the work of any succeeding school. To turn from a poem of Cowper's to a poem of Burns's, or of Byron's, is to pass at once from one sphere of art to quite another. In a word, the typical protagonist of that

fierce and uncompromising war which was declared against the reign of *rococo* in politics, in religion, and in art, was indubitably Burns who, strictly speaking, followed Cowper as a reformer of poetry merely in time. The master note of Cowper's strains bears no resemblance to the master thought of Burns's verse. When the French revolutionaries were busy levelling to the ground all that was effete and unessential, all that was false to nature and to truth, Burns raised the standard of belligerent Romanticism, declared himself in his very first efforts an unyielding enemy to conventionality and formalism in state, in church, in literature; and eventually founded a new school of sentiment more in harmony with the existing moral and social system, and therefore more truly capable of illustrating the imaginative life of the individual and of society. Plunging into the vortex of the people and interpreting the lives, thoughts, feelings, and manners of the Scottish peasantry as they had never been interpreted before, he prepared the way indeed for the Romantic Revival which culminated in Walter Scott, who not only made the Middle Ages live once more and restored to art the lofty visions of chivalry and the old magic power of ghostly elements, but, following Burns, turned the national mind more and more to the elementary passions of humanity, and brought back the public eye to the picturesque and romantic side of poetry.

Three things, therefore, in this connection may be

specially claimed for Burns. In the first place, he opened up by such poems as *Tam o' Shanter* and the *Address to the De'il* a new and fertile field of romance which Coleridge began to cultivate in that grim satire on the public mismanagement of affairs called *The Devil's Thoughts* (1799), the matter-of-fact tone of which was obviously derived from Burns, whom Lamb was always recommending him to study. Then, secondly, he shook himself free of the conventional way of looking at man and nature that prevailed; lifted the imagination away from cities and city manners to the simple rustic life of Lowland Scotland; and forced the phrases of his peasant dialect into the world's literature. By the force and felicity of his own essays, which touched human life at every point, and especially brightened with a soft-beaming light of affectionate insight the hearts and homes of the toiling poor, he proved that the major afflatus could work as potently through a poetic medium that did not disdain vernacular truth, as through the correct and polished heroic couplets of a Pope. And in this way he led Wordsworth to seek among common things and poor and simple people and the solitudes of mountains the true *materia poetica*. And, lastly, by reviving and strengthening the national feelings of his countrymen, Burns, whose fervid patriotism resembles the Italianism of Dante rather than the milder nationality of other world-poets, essentially contributed to fructify the living productions of the new Scottish



School which came into being with Scott, the king of romantics and the flower of our genius, who re-echoed in those epoch-making romances of the *Lay* (1805) and *Marmion* (1808) the warblings of scalds and bards and troubadours, and the stirring or plaintive minstrelsies of the Border districts which had aforetime kindled the fire of song in the young heart of Robert Burns.

## X.

It is not here the place to treat in detail of those intimate connections which may be traced between the many writers from Pope to Burns who specially addressed themselves to the poetic interpretation of the world of outward nature. One point, however, incidentally dropped (*ante* §§ vii. and viii.) now calls for closer consideration. It is obviously uncritical to put to one man's account all the credit of so epoch-making a movement as that which brought the day of Grub Street pastorals to an end. The dismissal of pseudo-classical or artificial poetry, the return to nature and vernacular truth, the final adoption of the realistic and romantic style—these things represent the labour of many independent workers, the slow elaboration of many diverse elements. Art invariably follows the course of Nature, and does not move by sudden leaps and bounds. And the poetry of Burns, as the next chapter will more fully discover, was in great measure

an accretion of ideas and forms which had been transmitted to him from a past that had shown plenty of enthusiasm and activity, and which he did not disdain to re-work on his own anvil into purer and more perfect shapes. In point of fact that poetry of external nature which roused and re-invigorated the national mind that had been lulled into insensibility by the suave and delicate movement of Pope's didactic lyricism, was really inaugurated by the thrush-like improvisations of Dyer (1698-1758) and the pastoral piping of Thomson (1700-1748), whose landscape, like that of the poet of *The Gentle Shepherd* (1725), is full of the melody of breeze and bird and stream. These two may be said at least to have met half way the naturalistic movement which, recommencing with Ramsay (1686-1758) in Scotland after the union of the Crowns in 1603,—an event that undeniably helped to weaken the vernacular character of the Scottish language and even quench for a time the native Scottish spirit as revealed in the poetry of Henryson and Dunbar,—reached its full volume and intensity in the lyrics of Burns, who had a heart that listened more intently and an eye that loved more deeply. The youthful singers of *Grongar Hill* and *Winter* (1726) found, like Ramsay, their inspiration on the hillside and by the stream. The one was nursed among the wide aerial wastes of the Cambrian mountains. The other had his imagination moulded, his observational and creative powers fixed, on the slopes of the Carter

Fell and the Cheviots and by the braes of the wimpling Jed. They are therefore poets of Nature's own rearing; connecting links between the epoch of Burns and Wordsworth who saw and felt that the mightiest of former poets had not drawn from the familiar scenes of human life all that they had in them to melt and move the heart, and that great naturalistic age whose sun rose with James I. (1394-1437) and set with Alexander Montgomery (1535-1605), the last great national poet of the Stuart period, the penetrating power of whose perceptions of poetical elements was almost equal to theirs. In a word, with Ramsay and Dyer and Thomson the limited traditional view of nature really came to an end. By which is meant that conventionalism, at least of feeling, was wholly abandoned by them. They entered with a deeper, more imaginative insight into the manifold aspects of nature.

And the new power in British poetry which thus flowed from them soon influenced other writers of the time. Collins, Gray, and Goldsmith produced delineations of scenery which, if less fresh and truthful than those of Ramsay or Burns, differed essentially from the conventional mixtures of the time of Philips. They showed a kindred spirit of close and loving observation of the simple everyday aspects of things; and, in the contributions which they made to the development of the movement, scenery, music, and

pathos are oftentimes fused in a perfect and touching way. Even Beattie (1735-1803) has the true pulse of nature feeling, and his delicate and sensitive taste and powerfully impassioned diction led to the production of much better work than his own. The analytic narrative poem of *The Minstrel* is in fact a mild anticipation of *The Prelude* which Wordsworth wrote some thirty years afterwards; and, such is his sense of the power of locality and historical association, that there is besides a forecast in it of the romantic spirit and circumstantial vividness of Scott. This descriptive stanza again from the *Epistle to Alexander Ross*, the poet-schoolmaster of Lochlee, is at once reminiscent of Ramsay and prophetic of Fergusson (1751-1774), Burns's immediate forerunner, who gives us, though with still more vivid directness, similar glimpses of characteristic Scottish scenery;—

Oh, bonnie are our greensward hows,  
 Where through the birks the burnie rows,  
 And the bee bums and the ox lows  
   And saft winds rusle [rustle],  
 And shepherd lads on sunny knowes  
   Blaw the blythe fusle [whistle].

Beattie, in short, has some passages not unworthy of the closest observers of nature in a naturalistic age, and is instinctively true to the just methods of poetical representation.\* He at least sees at a

\* See Veitch *Feeling for Nature in Scottish Poetry*, ii. 73-76; and 110.

distance, if he does not actually reach, the promised land which Cowper and Fergusson, Burns and Wordsworth enter and possess.

And what I have said of Beattie applies with still greater force to those three poets by whom the movement was still further advanced. Taking them in chronological order these are, Chatterton (1752-1770), the founder of the New Romantic school who prophesied in the pseudo-antique *Rowley Poems* of Scott, Coleridge, and Keats, and provided the lyric octo-syllabic movement which was used so effectively in *The Lay*, in *Christabel*, and, with less success, in the early metrical romances of Byron; Cowper (1731-1800), already mentioned as the writer who with fearless alacrity not only abandoned conventionalism of feeling, but broke the chains that had fettered poetry, and in *The Task* of 1785 threw to the winds the worn-out moulds of Pope's and even of Dryden's era; and Crabbe (1754-1832), born and bred like Burns among the poor, who designed and executed *The Village* (1783) with the view of showing that rural life when depicted with stern fidelity as it existed in reality was infinitely more impressive, even in the strictly artistic sense, than rural life as it was conventionally described by late eighteenth-century poets when they affected the pseudo-romantic pastoralism of the classical Renaissance. In the work of these writers we have examples

of the three chief phases of the poetic revival which discover themselves almost concurrently in the Doric provincialism of Burns who, in 1786, substituted the work-a-day world of the Scottish Lowlands and the ever-changing drama of actual common life for the spurious Arcadia of Pope's age and the unvarying dreamland of conventional fancy. In them we have the true beginnings of the romantic, the reflective, and the realistic types of art which, after Burns's day, were advanced to a state of sovereign perfection by Scott, Wordsworth, and Byron, who carried forward to our own era the traditions peculiar to the last decades of the eighteenth century. The purely objective poetry of Chatterton led to the revival of the romantic temper which found its supreme expression, both as to spirit and form, in the epic-lyrical poetry of Scott. The pensive amenity of Cowper's solitary and meditative muse, his unconventional pictures of fen scenery, and his pathetic episodes of humble life, nourished and stimulated the profound imaginative powers of Wordsworth who, beholding nature full of sentiment and excitement and "man suffering amid awful forms and powers," aimed at the exaltation of rural life and a more concentrated presentment of passion in the lowly, and constantly endeavoured to bring his language still nearer to the real language of men. And the minute pre-Raphaelite realism of Crabbe's descriptions of actual nature was in a certain sense a preparation

for the tumultuously beautiful poetry of personal passion which was produced by Byron whose primary purpose was avowedly to paint things as they were. As an observer and painter of the individual truths of society and human life he surpasses Crabbe in many respects, though with a mind essentially classical his poetic phrase seldom opens to us, as Crabbe's does invariably, the unseen qualities of natural objects. These then are the several stages in the short but vigorous evolution of poetic naturalism which dates from Ramsay's and Dyer's day.

Now the genius of Burns was sensibly influenced by these masters and renovators of poetry who wrote between 1724—the date of *The Tea Table Miscellany*—and the publication of *The Task* in 1785. His poetry bears the form and pressure of Ramsay and Shenstone, of Thomson and Gray, of Beattie and Fergusson and Cowper. In a sense the power and popularity of a poet who from start to finish waged war on all human and poetic conventions were conditioned on the revolutions in ideas and taste which these writers created by the gradual abandonment of conventionalism, the re-assertion of the principle of individuality, the poetic rehabilitation of forms, and the restoration before his advent of the natural and romantic temper to British art. The high level both of feeling and of accomplished versification which they had attained provided in other words a starting point to Burns. Without the example,

impulse, and suggestions of new lines of poetry which we owe to the abovementioned writers, Fergusson and Burns, Scott and Wordsworth could not have been what they were or done what they did. Poetic methods and ideas are thus seen to be a growth as well as an inspiration. And Burns's work must therefore be compared with the natural standard gradually formed and fixed by the successive efforts of many independent artists, each of whom had benefited by the more or less experimental work of his predecessors. This is a point on which special emphasis must be laid, since the place he occupied in the literature of his epoch is apt to be overlooked. And connected with this there is another point not less mark-worthy. If he was not the actual originator of the revolution in style and ideas, Burns, more truly than Cowper before him, or Wordsworth after him, was one of the first representatives of the change, as he was, beyond all parallel, the most independent exponent of the artistic revolt that took place in Britain and which was more closely connected than is often supposed with changes in the political world of the eighteenth century. It may be that in his recognition of and loyalty to the manners, the simple everyday life, the rural character, and the scenery of his native land, our poet was simply a follower of the movement initiated by Ramsay and Thomson, by Cowper, and others. But that holds equally true of Wordsworth, the most meditative of all English poets, of whom, however, a contrary opinion is generally entertained. Many



believe that the new literary era began with his advent ; that the aristocratic period of poetry ended, and the democratic commenced, with the publication of the *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798. And there is no denying that in a sense Wordsworth *was* the literary Arminius who emancipated our literature and language from the foreign rule and the Gallicised traditions of the neo-classic poetry of the Augustan age. Nevertheless Burns preceded and heralded Wordsworth, not only in time but as a master and renovator of poetry ; and the best proof of the fact is to be found in the frank acknowledgment of his inspiration which the sweet-souled singer of Rydal makes in the well-worn quatrain :—

Whose light I hailed when first it shone,  
    And showed my youth  
How verse may build a princely throne  
    On humble truth.

Wordsworth's delineations of human character and incident are wider and deeper, but they are not more vivid nor more real than those of Burns. And in the Scotch rather than in the English poet we discover in all its broader and more salient features the revolt against convention both in art and society. The truth is, as I have all along implied, that Burns is pre-eminently 'the poet of the return to nature, and of the simple human affections. Like other men, he has his limitations. Large tracts of human experience are beyond his horizon. Many regions of poetic nobleness

and splendour remain unvisited by him. And some of the deeper and subtler phases of human feeling he leaves untouched. But in him the joy in natural objects, of which traces are to be found in all the poets who follow Ramsay and Thomson, is first linked with a sense of the oneness of human nature, of universal brotherhood. The sense of natural beauty is fused, so to speak, with the instincts and impulses of an eclectic humanitarianism that first found utterance through Cowper. And he deliberately and with high purpose chooses the speech of common life and of the poor to give imaginative expression to those aspects of Nature and simple offices of rural existence to which, during the prevalence of urban habits, the artificialised society of eighteenth-century England had become insensible. Such impressions of reality and truth as we get from Burns are no doubt sharpened and strengthened by the large opulence of Wordsworth's thought and the pomp and sonority of his phrase which also follows closely the diction of real life, particularly that of the peasantry. But, whatever we may say of the *form*, the dominant *idea* of Wordsworth's poetry has indubitably its commencement in Cowper, who first removed the art from the highly artificialised sphere of town life and social action to that of individual reflection and the simple life of unadulterated nature, and in Burns who still more effectually moulded the stuff of human nature into luminous form and stamped the growing

tendencies of the time with the authentic seal of his genius.

Truth is the first law of poetry as of life. This of course had been partially discovered by Thomson and Gray whose vision is mannered but genuine. Its significance had appealed still more forcibly to Ramsay and Fergusson ; and it became the animating principle of Wordsworth's poetic theory and practice. But it is in Burns that the craving for deep truth and reality, which arose out of the intellectual ferment of the French Revolution, first displayed itself in all its force and fulness. Inflexible loyalty to truth is the salient feature of his life and the prime condition of all his writings. The very foundation of his poetry is his close observation of men and things. As regards realistic verisimilitude and compressed energy of idea and expression Burns stands unrivalled. Characters are sketched in sentences of laconic pith, as in *The Author's Earnest Cry and Prayer*. The familiar incidents, the antique customs, and superstitious observances of village life are touched with real poetic vigour in a few lines, as in his assay-piece of *Tam o' Shanter*, or the imperishable idyl of *Halloween*. To the trivial events that weave the woof of commonplace rustic life he gives a new beauty and a deeper meaning. The very lowest things in nature are raised into the domain of Art by a single phrase of piercing emphasis, as in that

matchless Rembrandtesque delineation of roving rugged penury and boisterous revel known to us under the humble name of *The Jolly Beggars*, where the discerning eye discovers high lights in the midst of the environing darkness, and no part of the grim phantasmagoric picture—from the “raucle carlin” and the hawking, cheating “ragged brats and callets,” to the “wee Apollo” and the scarred “Son of Mars”—is lost in comparatively colourless shadow. There is hardly a side of human nature, in short, which Burns has not touched, and in touching has not adorned. And in his most ideal portraitures he never relaxes his hold of reality and truth. His mind is strictly limited to the range of what his eyes see. And Man and Nature stand forth therefore as they are, and have always been. The Widow Leezie and the village quack, the pharisaical pretender and the carousing vagrant, the toiling ploughman whom he loves and the very Devil whom he cannot hate;—of all these, with the snowstorm and the thaw, the woods and haughs of Coila and the brackened braes of Nithsdale, he gives us not only finished pictures painted with a few vivid strokes, but pictures that are obviously finished in presence of the object and not in the studio with his back to the window after the manner of Pope and his followers who seem to have lived in libraries and not in the open air. The Ayrshire poet if he paints at all must paint from Nature

with his eye on the object even if the object be as trivial as a field-mouse or a mountain daisy, or as humble as a pet ewe, a wounded hare, or a worn-out mare. These are the pets of literature which his genius has canonized. They rank with Scott's and Byron's dogs and the tame hares of Cowper. In a word, it was Burns, and not Wordsworth, who, studying nature for himself and not through poetical interpreters, led the way to the fresh woods and pastures new of the School of Modern Romance.

## XI.

Now two things, it seems to me, may never be forgotten in any disinterested criticism of this period. First, if the eighteenth century was an era of revolt, it was also an era of resurrection and reconstruction. It was not wholly barren, reactionary, or destructive. On the contrary, and especially in its later literary phases, it was eminently an epoch of spiritual, political, and artistic development that proceeded in strict conformity with ancestral laws. In its life and its literature we discover a real and continuous growth; a gradual expansion of the stream of traditional national life. And, secondly, its work, rich in constructive and liberating forces, provided, as has been pointed out, a safe mode of transition from the ideas, forms, and manners of medieval

times to those of modern society. It is in this sense, I apprehend, that Matthew Arnold was wont to speak of it as "our excellent and indispensable" eighteenth century. It established a certain kinship and sympathy between past and present; and was, in short, not only a necessary link in a long chain of historic national development but the seed-time of all modern language and literature.\* These points are so important that I shall in this concluding section enlarge upon each separately.

1. It would be difficult for an impartial critic possessed of the facts noted in the foregoing pages to accuse the eighteenth century of inherent barrenness and poor results. It was very far indeed from being a time of mental stagnation in Britain. Its life and literature were full of new and significant departures; experimental movements for the most part, yet noteworthy as contributory streams to the growing tide of modern democracy and philosophy in State and Church which not only quickened literary enterprise and led to the remarkable poetical revival which ushered in the present century, but swept away a vast number of superficial and one-sided ideas and sentiments by which all preceding knowledge had been alloyed. The period from the death of Dryden to the death of Burns was essentially a

\* On this point see Courthope *The Liberal Movement in English Literature*, pp. 40, *et seqq.*

period of growth, development, and slow accretion of richness. It witnessed a remarkable development of metaphysical speculation from the *Essay* of Locke to the *Treatise* of Hume, in whose vigorous and reflective mind we find mirrored the dawn of modern critical philosophy in Europe. It saw not merely the evolution from the expiring schools of comedy but, strictly speaking, the absolute *creation* through Richardson (1689-1761) and Fielding (1707-1754) and Smollett (1721-1771), of the modern novel which, diverted into new channels by their imitator Bage (1728-1801) who embodied, like Godwin and Shelley, the spirit that brought about the Revolution, has become the literary equivalent in the Victorian age of the Elizabethan drama and the pastoral romances of the seventeenth century. And to the extension and enormous popularisation of novel-writing the age of prose can add as an equally distinctive and characteristic development the rapid rise and vast power of journalism as a new literary profession. Nor can it be forgotten that the poetical literature of the period was indispensable to the higher efforts of the age that succeeded. In the romantic reaction that followed the death of Burns the absolute worthlessness of eighteenth-century verse formed an essential part of the new critical creed. But a sounder judgment has since prevailed against such a sweeping generalisation. Pope, Thomson, Collins, Gray, Beattie,—these, to say nothing of Ramsay and

Cowper, Burns and Wordsworth, who wrote in direct opposition to the prevailing habits of the epoch, are names that would redeem any age from the charge of poetic worthlessness and failure. They were not merely masters of literary craft, but artists in whose work one can trace the gradual resumption of a delicate and intelligent observation of nature and society, and a dawning interest in and growing taste for Gothic romance, which reached its highest point with the achievements of Scott, the supreme embodiment of joyous objectivity, in the first decade of the present century. Such poetry as that of Pope and his immediate followers may have wanted inspiration, lofty sentiment, penetrative passion ; but who will venture to affirm that it is destitute of value? We must remember that the higher literary forms which now exist came through the history of the eighteenth century as the flower comes slowly on the plant. The free outburst of the full blossom in the day of Burns and Wordsworth was the result of that long period of gradual development and blind yet careful groping for the appropriate sunlight by which alone the apparently dying flower of poetry could be stimulated to shed seed and shoot suckers for a new growth or different formations.

In short, there are signs of development everywhere in the history of the eighteenth century. In spite of certain debasing aspects one notices a general and



strenuous effort to escape from the bondage of dead forms into simple truth of life. Men were earnestly bent on human good, full of humane eagerness for improvement. There was undoubtedly widespread corruption in the politics of the century. Its genius for enterprise and reform plunged it into changes that ended in portentous catastrophes. But even these calamities resulted from the prevailing passion for truth and the over-mastering aspiration for a richer and fuller life. Notwithstanding the prevalence of rationalism and mechanical deism, there was apparent a waxing zeal and a more cordial recognition of the importance of religion within the Church, which was materially increased from without by the prosperity of the Dissenters and the formation of the two bodies of Methodists. The conscience of the nation was roused when a certain renaissance of theological or ecclesiastical writing took place in protest against the rationalising and Latitudinarian tendency in matters both temporal and spiritual. The belief in a supernatural creed was quickened through the seeming separation of the Evangelicals; and in ethical philosophy, in science and religious truth, — all much tinctured with political and social Liberalism, — the period can challenge comparison with any century in our annals. Art again was offensively realistic and on the whole below the average. Yet it was strong in fiction, and supreme in music, whilst the buried and forgotten seeds of romantic fancy burst forth into new

life in English literature which had been hardened and de-romanticised by writers of the Augustan school whose work in form and spirit was obviously constructed in imitation of French models. And although eighteenth-century verse was strictly speaking not of the highest, the latter half of the century, whilst exhibiting an apparent exhaustion of poetical material, was marked by the creation of a new order of poetry. Commencing with *The Evergreen* (1724) of Ramsay, the epoch-making *Reliques* (1765) of Percy, and the *Rowley Poems* (1777) of Chatterton, and, working through Cowper, it not only influenced "the bare-foot Muse" of Burns, but rendered possible that revival of the romantic temper in the literature of the present century which affords perhaps the best possible refutation of Macaulay's pessimist doctrine that, "as civilization advances, poetry necessarily declines."

Now it has been my purpose to show that Burns, whose poetry is instinct with the life and movement of his era, carried on the traditions peculiar to the eighteenth century. The social and political questions which were becoming of paramount interest in men's minds found an embodiment in his art, just as they had done in the controversial satires of Dryden, in the personal satires of Pope, in the composed moralisings of Goldsmith. Doubt and struggle were the ruling tendencies of the time. And naturally enough his dashing and offhand verse which obeys specific laws of

vehement activity and wayward beauty, reflects the political passions of the period with all its multifariousness of social and spiritual elements, or translates into animated types the crude violence, the fanciful eccentricities, the wayward humours, and the strenuous upward strivings of his day. Necessarily it has in it elements of conflict, of uncertainty, even of equivocal sentiment. In the militant Whiggism of Burns, even in its final phase, there is assuredly less of the constitutional conservatism of Burke (1729-1797), the most eminent of contemporary Whigs and the first of all declamatory writers, than of the revolutionary radicalism of Paine (1736-1809), the most formidable exponent of anarchist ideas in religion and politics, whose *Rights of Man* formed part of our poet's slender library until 1793, when the Sedition trials rendered it expedient for him to part with it secretly. The sapless utilitarianism of Paley again is more apparent perhaps in his ethical and religious opinions and sentiments, which admittedly betray some disparagement of the severer virtues, than the stringent conscience-moulding faith of Butler. Probably his creed, such as it was,—for there is no evidence that he ever thought very profoundly upon theological questions,—was that of Hume, which, regarded merely from the philosophical point of view, is much the same as Scott's or Carlyle's. On this point the reader may refer to the poet's letter to Cunningham of 25th February 1794. And there is doubtless more of the Petronian humour of a Churchill

(1731-1764) than the chaste reserve of a Cowper in the virile and weighty, but sometimes violently vituperative verse of Burns. And yet his poetry from beginning to end exhibits not only fierce intolerance of political or ecclesiastical despotism combined with fervent love of home and country, but a devotion to truth, a warmth of feeling and width of sympathy, a fineness of physical sensibility and a keen perception of the infinite complexity of human life, which formed in a special degree the characteristics of the finer minds of his epoch.

Burns was the leader in the rising war against despotism in life and the literature through which life speaks. Not one of his contemporaries who devoted themselves to subjectivity displayed a more impassioned search for reality, a deeper delight in nature, a happier power of rendering her beauties. Not one of them spoke with such thrilling accents of vehement sincerity to the universal human heart. Along with his absolute simplicity what strikes one is his facility of impression of the problems of life, and the ease and supreme dramatic power of his utterance. The poetry of the period indeed shows no finer fetches of moral wisdom, and random sayings of laconic pith and enduring power, than those with which the pages of Burns are so plentifully starred. Take at haphazard the well-worn phrase which was wrung out of him by the dull brutality

of living and the gross time-serving of his age;—

Man's inhumanity to man  
Makes countless thousands mourn ;

or those golden "bosom-lines" that breathe the true spirit of Christian philosophy—

O wad some Power the giftie gie us,  
'To see oursels as ithers see us :  
It wad frae mony a blunder free us,  
An' foolish notion ;

or that pregnant aphorism which proclaims the enrichment of motive to be the first duty of humanity—

The heart ay's the part ay  
That makes us right or wrang ;

or those tender lines in which he touches sure and straight the secret of the highest life—

Affliction's sons are brothers in distress,  
A brother to relieve, how exquisite the bliss.

Take again this quatrain with which by the simple force of his unsophisticated mind he cleaves his way through the shows of things in an age of artificiality and polite pretence to the reality and truth that lie behind and beyond—

The social, friendly, honest man,  
Whate'er he be ;  
'Tis he fulfils great Nature's plan,  
And none but he ;

or these lines in which with unaffected sincerity of thought he teaches wisdom to time-serving senators—

Let posts or pensions sink or soom,  
 Wi' them wha grant them,  
 If honestly they canna come,  
 Far better want them ;

or, lastly, the often quoted passage in which he strikes fearlessly at the timid Tories who strove to make "art tongue-tied by authority," and practically compresses within the small space of four lines the central argument of Milton's *Areopagitica*, the first formal plea for the freedom of the British press—

Here's freedom to him that wad read,  
 Here's freedom to him that wad write ;  
 There's nane ever fear'd that the truth should be heard,  
 But they wham the truth wad indite. [interdict.]

What pre-eminently distinguishes Burns's poetry is, as Carlyle pointed out, its air of absolute sincerity or indisputable truth. It constantly discovers a strenuous mental effort to penetrate appearance and attain to that highest truth and beauty which constitute the alpha and the omega of all enduring art. The special characteristic, or *ethos* as it may be called, of Burns is no doubt strangely combined. You discover in his poetry, that is, a strong and continuous struggle between opposing views. But you also detect a positive and coherent element in it. And this is the point which I have striven to

elucidate in the foregoing pages. The pursuit of fact is the vital element of his art power. Pope aimed at pleasure, Burns at truth. In spite of the almost ceaseless play of conflicting thoughts and feelings, and the current of controversy with the world which runs throughout his whole work, the poems and songs of Burns have that note of assurance and certainty without which a poet, be his natural or technical gifts and graces what they may, can have no informing or assuaging message for mankind. In a rare and individual manner he represents an epoch which practically gave us a new morality, a new religion, a new polity, and a new art. He feels its emotions deeply, and he gives expression to them in homely and vigorous language that betrays an inexhaustible passion for truth and nature. His ideas nourish themselves in the common heart, in the common life of his race. Every line tingles with "the joy of eventful living," or throbs with the struggling life of civilised mankind. His sincerity commands attention: his fidelity to nature retains our interest. There is, it is true, an aweless audacity in the humour with which he sketches a caricature; but it is usually qualified by a dignity of sentiment that is not feigned, and even his most Rabelaisian sallies are redeemed from grossness by lofty thoughts expressed in language of animated seriousness. His satire is trenchant, and no writer before him with the single exception

of Dunbar, has used the Scottish language as an instrument of pure invective with more complete mastery and originality of manner. He coins epigrams that sting like poisoned arrows, as in the *Earnest Cry*, or with a few firm broad touches paints a picture like that tremendous sketch of William Fisher in *Holy Willie's Prayer*—unmatched for vivid reality from the days of Dryden and Pope till now—in which the unmasked hypocrite, whose existence we can neither doubt nor deny, is remorselessly revealed in a lurid blaze of infernal light. And yet there are tones of melting pathos and penetrative passion in “the music of his rustic flute” that soften the frequent asperities of his robust and combative muse. If from his intense feeling of reality he cannot produce anything superficial, neither is he capable of destroying in mere wantonness the settled convictions of mankind, albeit with a mind somewhat prone to profane polemics and coarse village disputes and personalities, he brings the matter of ecclesiastical debate from the pulpit down to the level of the tavern and the market-place. It is his primary purpose, in short, to build up truth, not to raise a laugh at the expense of cant and deception; to condemn the sin, not to pillory the sinner; to reform, and not merely to ridicule those large sections of the human family which were represented by the Hornbooks and Holy Willies of Burns's day.



Scotsman though he was, and writing almost entirely in the Scottish tongue, Burns was not only the most considerable poet of his century, superior to Dryden and Pope and Cowper, the three greatest among them, but his was the irradiating and Promethean mind that gave a new impulse and direction to human thought. His writings were saturated with the great thoughts of the age, and both in permanence and intensity his influence far surpassed that of the others. The force of his character and the thrill of his personal genius gave an impetus to what for good or evil are now called political and theological liberalism in Scotland. He identified himself, as we have seen, with those epoch-making movements—Jacobin and humanitarian—which aimed at the social elevation and enfranchisement of the masses, and the liberation of religion from the narrowing spirit of formula. Democracy with all its possibilities and dangers has not got beyond *A Man's a man for a' that*. Broad Churchism has still no better hopes or higher views than those disclosed in the *Address to the De'il*, and especially in the half-tender half-humorous apostrophe to "auld Nickie-ben," which suggests the possibility of the conversion of evil spirits, and holds up to ridicule the vindictive perversions of Gothic theology. And his songs, and even his second-rate election ballads, have done more for civil and religious liberty than whole libraries of statute books. As an original writer or the recoter

of the lyric literature of Scotland which, at the magic of his touch, sprang up again in new sweetness revived and purified, he not only won for art a new domain but exerted a healthier influence than schools of philosophy or seminaries of priests upon the general body of human thought and speech. As Petrarca was a forerunner of Luther, so Burns was a successor of Knox in the history of the Scottish Reformation. The fire of patriotism was rekindled on the national altars by *Scots wha hae*, the greatest war-ode of all time. The pathos and passion of human life were exemplified in such ideal love-songs of spontaneous and unreflecting emotion as *Mary Morison* and *Ye Banks and Braes* which voice the essential passions of human nature in every age and land. And the doctrine of universal brotherhood, profoundly reflected in the modern growth of nationalities, was taught in that perfect hymn of *Auld Lang Syne*. And what enhances the value of the rich and gracious heritage he left behind is the fact that whilst other singers and seers had said such things, and said them at times perhaps as well as he, Burns lived his creed and acted on his own precepts. He not only pointed to, but helped forward the coming day when

Man to man, the world o'er,  
Shall brothers be for a' that.

He practised that charity of heart and intellect without which a consummation so devoutly to be wished can

never be realised. And, pressing home upon the heart and conscience of his age the great truth that individual destiny is fixed not by pelf and position but by principle, proclaimed at once the dignity of "honest poverty," the nobility and deathless power of simple "sense and worth," and made it easier for us to remember and harder for us to forget that there is nothing low in lowly estate.

Nor did his modern gospel of humanitarianism confine itself to the well-worn axiom of the greatest good of the greatest number of sentient beings. It extended itself towards a goal which present-day legislation is striving to reach in Acts for the protection of wild birds and in regulations for the prevention of cruelty to animals. As the coadjutor of Cowper and the anticipator of Wordsworth, he was a pioneer and populariser of that wide-growing movement which is rapidly bringing the inferior animals within the scope of our common Christianity. The poet whose sensitive heart despaired with the evicted field-mouse, or responded to the terror of the wild-fowl scared at Loch Turit, or shared in the cruel anguish of the wounded hare, or sang a half-humorous half-tender elegy in lament of his pet yowe, that pattern of prudence and maternal solicitude in whom he had found "a friend and neebor dear," and yet smiled amid his tears as he contemplated "the last sad cape-stane of his woes" in Mailie dead, was one who preserved and perfected the peculiar tenderness

and humour of the national character and fancy in faithful images that will withstand all vicissitudes of changing taste and time; and prevented our brilliant art of native poetry from sinking into fantastic ruin by thus ennobling the vernacular and increasing the simple forces of poetic expression, and by opening up a wider field of vision to the romantic poets of the new era who were deeply influenced by the strange yet familiar charm of his happy realism and personal frankness, his picturesque and penetrating Doric fancy, his love of outward nature and sympathy with the animal world which, anticipating the doctrine of Coleridge,—

He prayeth well who loveth well  
Both man and bird and beast,—

gave definite expression to the moral of the love and reverence of all creatures as an all-binding religious duty. Burns was moved by everything that was lovely and noble. Everything that was weak and wanted succour he was ready to receive. Not a created thing in the whole wide world was shut out from his sympathy; from the "cowering beastie" in the fields, to auld Nickie-ben in "yon lowin' heugh." He felt for all, and yearned for their welfare with godlike pity and tenderness of thought.

So far then from being destructive of morality, Burns's poetry, with its mounting and piercing melody that goes straight to the heart, tends to elevate and

perfect man's ethical state. So far from being subversive of religion—by which is meant religion in the old historic sense: not the hard, revolting, morbid religion of eighteenth-century Scotland that attempted to measure the “eternal verities” with the foot-rule of Calvinistic orthodoxy—it helps to revivify and enforce its cardinal principles and precepts. And so far from his excessively mundane art being a thing of mere Doric provincialism,—vulgar, limited, unspiritual,—as purblind critics besouth the Tweed have rashly maintained, it embodies a new artistic movement; and the unflagging freshness of its inspiration, the universality of its appeal, and the permanence of its conscience-searching influence, are three of its most salient characteristics. It has quickened man's sense of goodness by a glow of emotion, and made utility beautiful by shedding around it celestial rays of piety, patriotism, and brotherly love. It has deepened the basis of the ancient virtues, and restored to the social ethics of the modern era those that, neglected or ignored by the imagination and conscience of the previous age, now shine forth in purity and brightness, new stars in humanity's heaven. It has illumined the whole path of the future and anew impressed, alike on the senses and the conscience of mankind, the eternal difference between good and evil. The Charity that is not puffed up is illuminated by such a verse as this—

Who made the heart, 'tis He alone  
Decidedly can try us,

## THE HERITAGE OF BURNS.

He knows each chord its various tone,  
 Each spring its various bias :  
 Then at the balance let's be mute,  
 We never can adjust it ;  
 What's *done* we partly may compute,  
 But know not what's *resisted*.

The Benevolence that covers our relations with man and bird and beast inspires these stanzas of *A Winter Night* which display the depth and delicacy of his sympathy for the storm-stressed creatures of the wilds—

List'ning, the doors an' winnocks rattle,  
 I thought me on the ourie cattle,  
 Or silly sheep, wha bide this brattle  
                   O' winter war,  
 And thro' the drift, deep-lairing, sprattle  
                   Beneath a scour.

Ilk happing bird, wee helpless thing,  
 That, in the merry months o' spring,  
 Delighted me to hear thee sing,  
                   What comes o' thee ?  
 Where wilt thou cow'r thy chittering wing,  
                   An' close thy e'e?—

or these lines in the poem on the wood-lark, companion-minstrel of unspeakable love and sorrow, in which we feel the beating of his mighty heart—

Say, was thy little mate unkind ?  
 And heard thee as the careless wind ?  
 O' nocht but love and sorrow pined  
                   Sic notes o' wae could wauken.  
 Thou tells o' never-ending care,  
 O' speechless grief and dark despair ;  
 For pity's sake, sweet bird, nae mair,  
                   Or my poor heart is broken.

The Mercy again that softens Justice as with a gentle rain breathes through the well-worn lines—

Hear me, ye venerable Core,  
 As counsel for poor mortals,  
 That frequent pass douce Wisdom's door,  
 For glaikit Folly's portals ;  
 I, for their thoughtless, careless sakes,  
 Would here propone defences,  
 Their donsie tricks, their black mistakes,  
 Their failings and mischances.

Ye see your state wi' their's compar'd,  
 And shudder at the niffer,  
 But cast a moment's fair regard,  
 What maks the mighty differ ;  
 Discount what scant occasion gave  
 That purity ye pride in,  
 And (what's aft mair than a' the lave)  
 Your better art o' hiding.

And the Humility of which the Cross is the Crown, and the Duty that ancient prophets and modern poets have alike recognised as the "Daughter of the voice of God," are illustrated and enforced in these verses with which the noble *Lament for Glencairn* concludes :—

In Poverty's low barren vale,  
 Thick mists, obscure, involv'd me round ;  
 Though oft I turn'd the wistful eye,  
 No ray of fame was to be found :  
 Thou found'st me like the morning sun  
 That melts the fogs in limpid air,  
 The friendless Bard, and rustic song,  
 Became alike thy fostering care.

O ! why has worth so short a date ?  
 While villains ripen grey with time !  
 Must thou, the noble, gen'rous, great,  
 Fall in bold manhood's hardy prime ?  
 Why did I live to see that day ?  
 A day to me so full of woe ?  
 O ! had I met the mortal shaft  
 Which laid my benefactor low !

The bridegroom may forget the bride  
 Was made his wedded wife yestreen ;  
 The monarch may forget the crown  
 That on his head an hour has been ;  
 The mother may forget the child  
 That smiles sae sweetly on her knee ;  
 But I'll remember thee, Glencairn,  
 And a' that thou hast done for me !

Everything, in short, that belongs by the best right to the Religion of Love, is to be found embalmed in the humanising song of the Ayrshire Bard. It has given to man a new power to feel and a new strength to bear, a new nerve to his faith and a new light to his hope, with firmness to govern and grace to obey. We have good reason therefore for regarding the life and work of Burns as among the highest boons the heavenly destinies ever bestowed on Scotland.

2. And this leads me to remark that the idea of progress which Burns represents, and which occupies so large a place in his poetry, is found on examination to be in reality not only non-revolutionary, but even anti-revolutionary. His imagination, that is, dwells with greatest delight upon whatever is justified by the



intellect and conscience. He is a poet of revolt ; but the whole body of his thought is neither less nor more than an expression of the true doctrine of conservative evolution. The excellence and indispensability of the eighteenth century are found to consist in, or result from, the highly conservative part which it played in the history of our politics, religion, and literature. And as of the age, so of Burns its chief exponent. He not only interprets but helps forward this continuously energetic movement within determined bounds. He represents the slow and gradual growth of manners and individual character, the growth of national well-being, the development of the entire human race from animality and lawlessness to the goal of universal brotherhood and true liberty which alone has the power, according to Burns,

To raise a man aboon the brute,  
And mak him ken himsel'.

From decade to decade the eighteenth century fulfilled its part in the gradual work of mental and moral development. It was rich in constructive forces ; and its art, in spite of the limitation of its ideal, co-operated with the general progressive tendency of the race. It has deeply-rooted conservative instincts ; and, treating the past with becoming reverence, carefully transmits the intellectual inheritance accumulated through the generations of mankind. We have, in short, advanced from out the past ; but our doing so was expressly conditioned on the precious heritage of the age of Pope and Cowper

and Burns whose influence we still bear with us.

Eliminate the eighteenth century from the literary record, and you at once destroy a necessary link in the chain of historic national development. Nay, more ; the annihilation of this indispensable connecting link would imply the destruction of all kinship and sympathy between past and present, and the effacement of all that is involved in the ideas of progression, of literary tradition, of collective mankind. Without some such "excellent and indispensable" halting-place it would be impossible even in thought to bridge over the wide gulf of imagination and sentiment that separates the amatory and pastoral poetry of Ramsay and Burns from the *Arcadia* of Sydney and *The Shepherd's Calendar* of Spenser, or Pope's didactic and argumentative poem of the *Essay on Man*, in which he simply versifies Leibnitzian optimism, from the jejune and frigid verse of the prosy metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century, and the Royalist lyrists who preserved something of the brave Shakespearian tradition up to the very moment of transition from romanticism to classicism. The eighteenth century fills in the gap and renders it possible for us to stand on a common intellectual ground with our sixteenth and seventeenth century ancestors. Looking back on the Elizabethan and Jacobean epochs through the strangely diffused light of the Georgian era "the nature of many of the sympathies which we are dimly

conscious of sharing with those ages is explained by modifications of manners effected in the intermediate period."\* As the work of Burns abundantly proves, the eighteenth century, in which, as we have seen, the Gothic darkness and tyranny had disappeared both in philosophy and politics, was not an age of mere scepticism and negation and artistic conventionality. Politically it embodied a limitless belief in human power and in human liberty. Artistically, whilst devoted mainly to critical didacticism, it had yet a faith and mission of its own, and a practical and effective method for their realisation in forms of enduring power and beauty. The aim of the epoch, broadly considered, was to fulfil the human evolution which had been anticipated and foreseen by ancient and medieval sages and seers, proclaimed by Christianity, and partially realised by Protestantism,† and, pushed still further forward by the European Revolution, which removed hindrances and furnished aids to the development and dignity of individual man, showed him the true use of freedom and to what end the powers of civil polity were given, and, in a word, touched the key-note of the days in which we live. Many obstacles stood between the century and this mighty aim. Religious forms forbade movement and advance. Political impediments and restraints limited the activities of the nation and prevented the free development of individual faculties. Artistic conventions arrested the flight of intelligence

\* See Courthope *ut supra* p. 41. † See Mazzini *Essays*, 1887, p. 24.

and gradually substituted perfection of form or mastery of poetical design for the worship of great thoughts and common human sympathies. It was necessary to overthrow these things ; and the century proved itself equal to the task. It waged a terrible but victorious war against tyranny, cant, and convention ; and Burns, who appeared at the close of one epoch and before the dawn of the other, and whose poetry forms a sort of summary of the entire experience of his age, is at once the result of the past evolutions of life and the representative of a society founded anew on the principle of individuality.

So far then from breaking with tradition, eighteenth-century literature was essentially a literature of tradition. So far from being opposed to what we now call conservative evolution, it was the legitimate offspring and realisation of that idea. Butler, for instance, advanced the cause of Christianity by reverting to old ideas and methods. Burke became the most sagacious interpreter of the Constitution because he discovered and acknowledged the latent wisdom which underlay general prejudices and old institutions which he strove to reform rather than explode. Pope developed the Chaucerian traditions of English poetry ; and, form and style apart, was less of an innovator than an imitator. Hume gave a new impulse and direction to human thought by the sceptical reduction of principles accepted from the dominant philosophies of Locke and Leibnitz. And

Burns introduced a generous fountain of fresh inspiration into Scottish poetry simply by reviving and developing the methods and measures, the spirit and sentiments of Dunbar and Ramsay. Fed by the life, action, manners, and art of the past, the age provided a safe mode of transition from the ideas and feelings and customs of the Middle Age to those of modern society. In its political and artistic aspects alike it made a suitable point of departure for the nineteenth century, and indeed prescribed its method and organisation—its literary purpose, its political law, its social system, its religious mission. Under each of these phases the progressive evolution of the thought of the time is revealed in the art of Burns. It thus exemplifies in a singular degree the great truth that there is no breach in the continuity of poetic history. Just as it is possible to trace the descent of Leo XIII. back to the first successor of St Peter under the last of the Cæsars, or the descent of the perfect prose of Renan's brilliant idyl of the *Vie de Jésus* back to the *Lingua Romana* which the Roman legions imposed upon the vanquished Gauls, so it is possible, and even easy, to trace the descent of Pope, the foremost literary figure of his age, back to Chaucer, his true poetic ancestor, whose old satiric methods of portraying character he revived and developed, or the simple pastoralism and penetrative insight, the quaint humour and "braid Scots" of Burns, through Ramsay and Fergusson, to Dunbar and Douglas. One can readily discover, for

instance, an unbroken thread of continuity between *The Dance of the Sevin Deidly Synnis* (1507) and *Death and Dr Hornbook* (1786). The one, like the other, is a kind of vision-masque whose ghastly horror is made real by traits taken from men of the poet's own time. And such Scotch Horatianism as this from Dunbar's poem of *Hermes the Philosopher* (circa 1510);—

Be merry, man, and tak not sair in mind  
 The wavering of this wretched world of sorrow ;  
 To God be humble, to thy friend be kind,  
 And with thy neighbours gladly lend and borrow ;  
 His chance to-night, it may be thine to-morrow ;  
 Be blythe in hearte for thy aventure,  
 For oft by wise men it has been said ere now  
 Without gladness availes no treasure.—

instantly suggests comparison with these stanzas from Burns's *Epistle to Davie* (1784):—

It's no in titles nor in rank ;  
 It's no in wealth like Lon'on bank,  
 To purchase peace and rest ;  
 It's no in makin' muckle, *mair* :  
 It's no in books, it's no in lear,  
 To make us truly blest ;  
 If happiness hae not her seat  
 And centre in the breast,  
 We may be wise, or rich, or great,  
 But never can be blest :  
 Nae treasures, nor pleasures,  
 Could make us happy lang ;  
 The heart aye's the part aye  
 That makes us right or wrang.

Think ye, that sic as you and I,  
 Wha drudge and drive through wet and dry,  
 Wi' never-ceasing toil ;

Think ye, are we less blest than they,  
 Wha scarcely tent us in their way,  
 As hardly worth their while?  
 Alas! how aft in haughty mood,  
 God's creatures they oppress!  
 Or else, neglecting a' that's guid,  
 They riot in excess!  
 Baith careless, and fearless,  
 Of either heav'n or hell!  
 Esteeming, and deeming  
 It's a' an idle tale!

Then let us cheerfu' acquiesce;  
 Nor make our scanty pleasures less,  
 By pining at our state;  
 And, even should misfortunes come,  
 I, here wha sit, ha'e met wi' some,  
 An's thankfu' for them yet.  
 They gi'e the wit o' age tae youth;  
 They let us ken oursel';  
 They mak' us see the naked truth,  
 The real guid and ill.  
 Tho' losses, and crosses,  
 Be lessons right severe,  
 There's wit there, ye'll get there,  
 Ye'll find nae other where.

Such comparisons, imperfect as they must be, aid a little in bringing home to the readers of poetry in the present day not only the idea of the unceasingly continuous evolution of Scottish poetry, but the close connection of Burns with those who wrote when the medieval was giving way to the modern spirit of which he is pre-eminently the organ and the reflex.

## CHAPTER III.

### THE SCOTTISH RENAISSANCE.

#### I.

THE Bard, like the priest of the oracle, is but the mouthpiece of Nature's decrees ; and " announces that which no man foretold." In a certain sense, that is, a poet of sovereign rank can never be forestalled. This holds true of Shakespeare and Burns and Goethe who sing in the fulness of their joy as Nature teaches them. But the most original and individual utterance—even that which shows the clearest signs of spontaneity and unreflecting emotion ; the lark-like strain of " unpremeditated art "—has necessarily reminiscences of earlier efforts, notes that recall those primal warblings which made the air musical in pre-literary ages, subtle suggestions of that original and eternal life out of which all poetic tradition takes its rise. The greatest maker is most truly the heir of all the ages. He grows in large measure to what he is by virtue of the thoughts and feelings that are transmitted to him out of the past. And of this truth we have a singularly forcible exemplification in the life and



work of Burns. Every epoch has its poet-prophet in whom, as we have seen, all lines of thought and feeling converge; its *sacer vates* who, standing on the mountain-tops of vision and mediating between man and nature, reveals the heart of a nation to itself; and, hampered by no forces external to his own genius, voices the thoughts, the emotions, and the aspirations of mankind. But just as it is the rhythm of Nature's laws and forces that really moves the spirit of the poet to rhythmic utterance, so, as a result of the preponderance of nature over will in all poetic life, there is discoverable in the melodious apocalypse of the *interpretes deorum* who thus penetrates and makes impressively known to us the sacred mysteries of the universe, the vital articulation of many individuals of whom we know little or nothing at all, yet of whom it may with safety be affirmed that they were inspired by the same *estro* or *afflatus* which influenced the imagination of the master whom we specially reverence.

The spirit of great men thus secretly diffuses itself; and in our most apprehensive moments we feel intensely the "omnipresence of all in each." As life consists in unity—the One in the Many—so the magnificent crystallisations of feeling and of phrase which we find in the poetry of a Ramsay, a Ferguson, or a Burns, are discovered in the final analysis to be formed as it were out of the coarse basaltic

masses of ruder ages which were molten and inter-fused by the "flame-eyed fire" of passion and the kindling and transfiguring imagination of the old *mackars*, in whose image-making power and weight of solid sense we find indeed the germ of those originalities on which the modern era so rashly prides itself. The flawless and light-darting gems that give a living lustre to the poetry of eighteenth-century Scotland represent the slow elaboration of many diverse elements from Barbour's to Ramsay's time. In a sense they are reproductions of the epoch-making experiments conducted in the laboratory of Dunbar's teeming brain. Burns at least would not have been so successful in moulding in "the quick forge and working house of thought" the extremes of exuberant sensibility and passionate impulse into forms of intense and varied portraiture, had it not been for Dunbar and Douglas and Lyndsay from whom he received as a precious heritage a very tempest and whirlwind of passion. Their vitality was not the vitality of an age, but of human nature. Their truth was not topical and transitory, but universal and immutable. And the central fire of their swift transforming genius may be said to have at once hardened, enriched, and rounded the dull and shapeless matrix of ancient Scottish art, and thus rendered it capable of crystallising purer and more perfect products than the crude romances and circumstantial epics of the brazen age of Thomas

the Rhymour (1219-1299)\* or John Barbour (1316-1396) and Andrew of Wyntoun who completed the *Orygynale Chronykyl of Scotland* in 1424, the year of the restoration of James 1.

The distinctively Scottish language of Barbour's *Bruce*—a branch of the Teutonic language, with strong affinities to the diction of Chaucer—in which we have all the earnestness of the strictest realism, lives anew in the equally robust but more melodious verse of Henryson and contemporary poets of the Stuart period where the same stern sense and absorbing interest of reality is combined with the soft and mellow idealising power that is characteristic of a higher poetic imagination; and it in part survives in the pastoral poetry of Ramsay and Burns which is intensely Scottish in idiom and subject, in feeling and treatment, and unites the realistic verisimilitude of the medievalist with the fervour and tenderness, the elevation and pure æsthetic charm of the modern spirit. The language of Ramsay or of Burns is essentially the language of all his brethren, precursors and contemporaries alike. As the intellectual continuators of Dunbar and Douglas it may indeed be said that their art is a real evangel of Nature, a living entirety, throbbing with pulses and powers, that suggests the puissant hand

\* These dates are conjectural. See Veitch *The History and Poetry of the Scottish Border*, p. 230.

and wonder-working brain of these old *mackars* who infused the blood of their own untamable hearts into the insipid or frigid forms of an earlier time ; or, to change the metaphor, injected like a molten fluid those higher elements of poetic imagination, fused by the primal fires of human passion, into that national embryo of symbolic art with its cumbrous forms and grim Homeric literalism which they brought forth, transmuted and transformed, from the womb of darkness, anarchy, and incoherence in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

## II.

THE virtue of criticism no doubt consists in detachment ; in isolating, that is, one thing from its environment, from the variety whose splendour may embarrass. But no single fibre of the thread of life can be unwound without disentangling the others. And although it is easy enough whilst tracing the development of purely Scottish taste and æsthetic feeling to separate into groups or schools those writers who became the moulders of Burns's taste and imagination, or assign to each his proper place in the special literary movement in which he played a part, it is impossible for the critic who has to deal with a growth of poetry to ignore the organic interdependence of its several parts, or those links

of sympathy which unite in one common brotherhood all who are really gifted with "the vision and the faculty divine." The national poetry must therefore be treated critically as a continuous product of the human spirit. And the individual poet must be viewed as at once the upholder and preserver of the truth and beauty of all life and nature who, fed by the Past only that he may enrich the Future which he beholds in the Present, carries everywhere with him deep radical affinities with the forms of ancient poets and "the fair humanities of old religion." As the whole realm of Nature is organically knit together by analogies with what lies beneath it, so Poetry in all its departments and stages of evolution is interrelated by subtle symbolisms of thought and passion, of emotion and language, to all that precedes or follows it. It is, in short, an apocalypse that neither ages nor ends : its ideas and sentiments, as Shelley somewhere says, "are the germs of the flower and the fruit of latest time." The reciprocal relationship of creative artists is therefore one of the most natural and interesting facts in the history of Literature and Art. There is always an element of spiritual kinship to be discovered throughout the great brotherhood of genius. And even the tradition which, in the general filiation of European art, connects the *maker* who, as poet, traverses the whole area of Nature or uses the complete key-board of Humanity, and records and reproduces what he sees and hears

in animated types and idealised forms of rhythmic art, with the *maker* who, as painter or sculptor, gives the exquisite creations of his fancy to the world in colours, in marble, or in metal, is not wholly wrong. There is nothing strained or fantastic for instance, in the criticism that professes to discover a link that unites Dante, the parent of modern song, with Michael Angelo and Cellini; or Milton—the Milton, I mean, of *Comus* and *Il Penseroso*—with Rubens when he produced the interceding “Saint Teresa;” or, our own Burns with Rembrandt and Teniers when he wrote *Tam o’ Shanter* and *The Jolly Beggars*. And if the poet and the painter are thus intimately connected, the relation of poet with poet is still closer and more apparent in every age. Notwithstanding vast differences of time and character, poets of successive epochs betray remarkable resemblances in style and singular similarities of thought; and sometimes we even find, as Barbour says, that

Contrary things evermore  
Discoverings of the tother are.

Of this we have a notable illustration in the case of Chaucer, who acknowledges as his intellectual ancestors the Trouvères of northern France and the early Italian singers. And the spiritual kinship of ancient and modern writers, or the internal affinities between mediæval and Renaissance art, is still more forcibly exemplified by the drama of Shakespeare, who

found in Ovid, the most modern of all the ancients, the fountain-head of mythic fables, and in Plutarch the frame-work of heroic story; who drew from the *Pandosto* of Greene, the novels or novelettes of Ser Giovanni, Cinthio, Bandello, and their associates, the romance and sensuous beauty of his sparkling comedies, or borrowed from Sagas of the North the substance of *Lear* and *Hamlet*, and fabricated out of the annals of Old England heart-shaking tragedies of Tudors and Plantagenets. We discover striking resemblances again between the *Faithful Shepherdess* of Fletcher and the *Comus* of Milton, or the *Hesperides* and pastoral elegies and love-songs of Herrick and the work of Martial and Theocritus and the lyrists of the Anthology. And, not to multiply instances, do we not detect

A Homer's fire in Milton's strains,  
A Pindar's rapture in the lyre of Gray?

Nor is this all. We even find singular verbal coincidences in poems of different dates, and central characteristics that betray a vital unity of feeling and purpose or a ruling individual sentiment that determines alike the choice of subject and method of treatment. A critical examination, for instance, of Thomson's *Seasons* will show that his descriptive passages, in which literal accuracy and poetical truth are rarely blended, are after all but a sublimer and more minute unfolding of the mystery of the "rolling year" whose life and spirit Pope had already pictured

in his mannered yet highly imaginative *Pastorals*. A still greater spiritual kinship exists between Chatterton's *Ballad of Charity* and the *La belle Dame sans merci* or *The Eve of St Agnes* of Keats. And *The Cottar's Saturday Night* of Burns is as truly inspired by the *Schoolmistress* of Shenstone as by the *Farmer's Ingle* of his immediate forerunner, Fergusson; whilst the *Excursion* of Wordsworth and the *Ænone* of Tennyson bear obvious traces of having been suggested by Beattie's *Minstrel* and his *Judgment of Paris*; and the marked qualities of Dunbar's *Lament for the Makaris*, written "quhen he wes seik,"—the same power of analogy, the same strong lines of resemblance between the life of man and the world of outward nature,—are to be found in Wordsworth's lines on hearing of the death of the Ettrick Shepherd.

Now forgetting that all originality is merely relative, and that every true poet is essentially retrospective—that all creative art, indeed, necessarily implies and pre-supposes insight, foresight, and retrospect in simultaneous action—these writers are taxed with plagiarism by the hasty Hotspurs of criticism. But the capable student of literary history knows better. He knows that each generation hands down its accumulated treasures to the next; that the good of the past is immortal and lives of necessity in the deeper life of to-day. The poetical virtue which is present in Æschylus and Lucretius and Horace is indubitably the same



poetical virtue that is present in Dante and Dunbar and Pope. Nay, more; all great national poets are interdependent and mutually illustrative. It is only necessary to cite as examples of this Dunbar and Douglas, Marlowe and Shakespeare, Fergusson and Burns, Goethe and Schiller, Coleridge and Wordsworth. They magnify, or reveal, or expound each other; and their aggregated performance not merely expresses the nation's spirit—the essential passions, aspirations, intuitions of a people—but displays, in spite of the remarkable freedom of individual development that is always noticeable, a singular unity of impression and tone which can alone be satisfactorily explained by the fact that “the essence of *originality* is not that it be *new*,” but that it be apocalyptic for the time, as the *Cain* of Byron was even after the great epic of Milton. Each poet, borne on

the rushing and expanding stream  
Of thought, of feeling fed by all the past,

simply takes from his predecessors what truth they have to teach, and passes along the still unextinguished torch of intelligence to those who come after him.

### III.

THESE remarks, though obvious enough, contain a truth which must not be neglected on the threshold of our inquiry into the origins of Scottish poetry

which at once embalms for us the spirit of a great people during four centuries of the world's development and reveals the universal and permanent elements of man's nature, and at the same time displays a genius which is local and spontaneously popular and yet thoroughly representative and national in tone and character. The more we read of Scottish poetry, the more we become convinced of the vast superiority of Burns, who possessed the true protagonist spirit and assailed, as we have seen, the traditions of four hundred years. If one begins his study of our national poets with a stern resolution to throw aside all prepossessions and judge of every man as if one had heard nothing whatever about him before, the first conclusion reached from desultory dipping into choice passages may well be that they all wrote with very much the same kind of power. Let the reader, for instance, in confirmation of this, experiment on such passages as these :—The lover's approach and address to Venus in the third Canto of *The Kingis Quair* of James I., which marks the commencement of that love-poetry of the country whose passionate music is echoed in the lyrics of Ramsay and Burns, of Hogg and Tannahill ; or that piece of refined realism in the touching and melancholy prelude to Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid* whose gaiety and fluent grace of description are unsurpassed in English literature between Chaucer and Burns ; or the finely-conceived personifications of Aurora and the new-born

May in the opening stanzas of *The Thistle and the Rose* of Dunbar, in whom we discover a distinct ascent to that higher æsthetical feeling which inspired Burns with a disinterested delight in the flowers of the field and the simpler and softer side of nature ; or the full and fine piece of description in the Prologue to *The Palace of Honour*, the earliest work of Douglas, who skilfully and clearly outlines those aspects of Lowland scenery which Ramsay and Burns reproduced in pictures and lines that show the same power of observation and fluent vein of fancy, the same purity of feeling and artistic finish ; or that noble outburst of Montgomerie in the first seven stanzas of his allegorical poem of *The Cherrie and the Slae*, which evinces a buoyancy and graceful ease scarcely to be found elsewhere till we come to the master-singer of the eighteenth century whose every line is redolent of the dauntless courage, the high hope, and lofty aspiration of his great precursor who flourished in the reign of the tyrant and truckler James VI., himself a singer of mediocre merit and the last of the group of national Scottish poets of the Stuart epoch. A tolerably careful study of the writings of these men will, I think, satisfy the reader that they possess and exercise the same kind of power. In the poetry of each and all we have at least the dash, sparkle, and spontaneity which indicate the most genuine native inspiration. They have all the power of vivid conception, mastery of expressive

diction, and command over descriptive detail which give to their separate pictures a concrete reality and completeness that impress and fascinate the mind.

And in a sense the same holds true of their successors—those Court poets of the seventeenth century who, in order to find a general audience after the union of the Crowns which led to the assimilation of the Scottish language with the English of the south, even deliberately forsook the vernacular and composed in a pure English style. The distinct decadence and even abandonment of the native language is specially apparent in three men of note—Sir Robert Aytoun (1570-1638), William Alexander, afterwards Earl of Stirling (1580-1640), and William Drummond of Hawthornden (1585-1649); men distinguished as rarely musical and natural lyrists, of Scottish birth and origin, but educated after the English fashion and in the English speech. Intervening at a time of barrenness in the higher fields of pure literature which had shown a decided tendency to languish after the death of Sir David Lyndsay in 1557, they imposed their style in a measure on their contemporaries and immediate successors. Applying then the same test to these scholar-poets of the seventeenth century the reader will discover in their verse the closest analogies with what preceded and followed it. They exercise the same kind of creative power, display the same kind of æsthetic feeling, and are

animated by a common spirit. Whilst English in language and culture their poetry, in a word, is subject to comparisons based on considerations of chronology and nationality. It is essentially Scottish in sentiment and in its descriptions of scenery, and may be said indeed to stand between the old mode of looking at outward nature peculiar to highly educated men like Dunbar and Douglas, whose poetic language abounds in words of classical, especially Latin, origin, and the more modern methods of Ramsay and Fergusson, men of humble, even mean, condition, whose language, though at times smelling strongly of the Luckenbooths and the Cowgate, was yet derived from the genius of the purer Scottish speech of Barbour and Henryson who are really more intelligible to a modern reader, I venture to think, than the Laureate of James IV. and the Bishop of Dunkeld. Take as an example this beautiful passage from one of Drummond's poems :—

With flaming horns the Bull now brings the yeare,  
Melt do the mountains' horrid helms of snow,  
The silver floods in pearly channels flow,  
The late bare woods green anadeams do weare ;  
The nightingall, forgetting winter's woe,  
Cals up the lazy morne, her notes to heare :  
Then flowers are spread, which names of princes beare—  
Some red, some azure, white and golden grow.  
Here lowes a heifer, there baa-wailing strays  
A harmless lamb, not far a stag rebounds :  
The shepheards sing to grazing flocks sweet layes,  
And all about the echoing aire resounds—

Hills, dales, woods, flouds, and ev'ry thing doth change,  
But she in rigour, I in love am strange.\*

These lines may be said to illustrate the rococo of the English Renaissance and the peculiar style of the Italian models that absorbed Drummond's attention. Yet they furnish a typical example of the elegant and reflective poetry of the period, from which the characteristics of Scottish landscape were not quite excluded. We have here, in short, the distinctly recognisable features of the Lowlands of Scotland, and even a forecast of the pastoral strains of Ramsay. In spite of the conventional and classical currents peculiar to this Transition Period, the broadening stream of Scottish poesy between the union of the Crowns and the date of "honest Allan" still shows in faint but fine reflections the distinctively national tendencies of Scottish literary art. The old native spirit, as we shall see later on, is enervated, not wholly quenched. The power put forth in the Scottish vernacular and truly national poetry of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries survives in the productions of the learned poets of the seventeenth century who, whilst starting from a higher level both of feeling and of accomplished versification, differ less in sentiment than in diction from Dunbar the great "makyr" of the reign of James IV., whose tendency to classicalism grew to pedantry in the hands of Douglas and

\* See Drummond *Poems* p. 6, (fol. ed., 1711).

Lyndsay, but attained its finest expression in the remarkable poems of Drummond who, though no native of England, deserves to be regarded as the reformer of English versification and one of the founders of English lyric poetry.

And when we come to the poets of the Modern Period (1686-1796) we are furnished with the most convincing proof of the fact that all through the ages there is a real community in the heart of Scottish singers: that epoch and surroundings are impotent to quench or even obscure the old native spirit of the Doric muse. They are all partakers of the primitive inspiration; and when Fergusson sings

My muse will nae gae far frae hame,  
Nor scour a' airths to hound for fame,

he expresses the chief aim and purpose of the national lyric movement of the eighteenth century, and announces the return to nature and to truth in an age that had grown sick of classicality and unreality in life and literature. At a time when the broken and transitional state of the language spoken up to the date of Lyndsay and Montgomerie formed a barrier to its literary use in scholarly hands, Drummond and his contemporaries who, for this reason, abandoned the vernacular for English, and yet retained many of the distinctively national sentiments and native idioms of Scottish poetry, gave an impetus to that classical tendency in literature

which had commenced with Aytoun, whose love sonnets were composed in the English of the classical writers of the south, and reached its height in 1637 with the remarkable volume *Delitiæ Poetarum Scotorum* published at Amsterdam by John Blaeu, under the auspices of Drummond's brother-in-law Sir John Scot of Scotstarvet\* But Ramsay and Fergusson who, as restorers or continuators of Doric provincialism, followed and furthered the work of the vernacular poets of the Stuart era, again turned our literature from conventional themes and so-called classical treatment to the objects and interests, the scenes and modes of Scottish life treated by Dunbar and his scholars, who rendered in their verse the beauties which appeal directly to sense as vividly as they apprehended them; and in this way they re-created a taste which was at last fully satisfied by the intense imaginative vision and fervid nationalism of Burns, who had pre-eminently that gift of style, and of making words sing in lines that rise and fall with the rush of a lark's or a linnet's flight, which recalls the ardent and high-soaring masters of Scottish lyrical poetry in the centuries that preceded him.

Pioneers and creators in the highest sense, Ramsay and Fergusson and Burns are all to be judged by chronological parallelism. Their equals in satiric power and dramatic delineation they yet submit to

\* See Veitch *ut supra*, ii. 22.



the unavoidable dictation of Dunbar and Douglas and Montgomerie. Their poetical writings which are truly national in character, subject, and fibre, not only exhibit the same kind of power, but reveal in many places conscious and deliberate borrowings or adaptations from their predecessors. For instance, Ramsay closely follows Dunbar's narrative poem of *The Freiris of Berwik* (written not later than the minority of James V.) in his admirable, quite Chaucerian, tale of festive humour entitled *The Monk and the Miller's Wife* (1722). And *The Vision* (1724) is still more obviously modelled on *The Cherrie and the Slae* (1597) of Montgomerie, which has longer retained popularity than any other poetical composition of the reign of James VI. Whole lines and couplets of its most striking stanzas indeed are taken from the older poem. And, in particular, Ramsay's description of the Genius of Caledonia in the fourth and fifth stanzas of *The Vision* is neither less nor more than a felicitous but literal paraphrase of Montgomerie's description of Cupid in the eighth and ninth stanzas of his didactic love-allegory. The sixteenth-century court-poet writes thus :—

Quha wald have tyrit to heir that tune,  
 Quhilk birdis corroborate ay abune,  
     Throw schowting of the larkis !  
 Sum flies sa high into the skyis,  
 Quhill Cupid walkinnes with the cryis  
     Of Natures chappell clarkis ;  
 Quha, leving all the hevins aboue,  
     Alighted in the eird.

Loe ! how that little God of Loue  
 Befoir me thair appeird !  
 So myld-lyke, and chyld-lyke,  
 With bow thrie quarteris scant ;  
 So moylic and coylie,  
 He lukit like ane sant.

Ane cleinlie crisepe hang ouir his eyis ;  
 His quauer by his naked thysis  
 Hang in ane siluer lace :  
 Of gold, betwix his schoulders, grew  
 Twa pretty wingis quhairwith he flew ;  
 On his left arme, ane brace :  
 This god aff all his geir he schuik,  
 And laid it on the grund :  
 I ran als busie for to luik  
 Quhair ferleis nicht be fund :  
 Amasit I gasit  
 To see that geir sa gay :  
 Persawing my hawing,  
 He countit me his pray.\*

Now compare this with the parallel passage of Ramsay's Jacobitish poem of 1724 the singular resemblance of which, both in structure and imagery, will at once strike the reader:—

Heir Somnus in his silent hand  
 Held all my senses at command,  
 Quhyle I foryet my cair ;  
 The mildest meid of mortall wichts  
 Quha pass in peace the private nichts,  
 That wauking finds it rare ;  
 Sae in saft slumbers did I ly,  
 But not my wakryfe mynd,

\* See *The Poems of Alexander Montgomerie*, by James Cranstoun, LL.D. (Scottish Text Society, 1886), Part i., pp. 6-7.

Quhilk still stude watch, and couth espy  
 A man with aspeck kynd,  
 Richt auld lyke, and bauld lyke,  
 With baird thre quarters skant,  
 Sae braif lyke, and graif lyke,  
 He seemt to be a sanct.

Grit darring, dartit frae his ee,  
 A braid-sword shogled at his thie,  
 On his left arm a targe ;  
 A shynand speir fill'd his richt hand,  
 Of stalwart mak in bane and brawnd,  
 Of just proportions, large ;  
 A various rainbow-colourt plaid  
 Owre his left spaul he threw :  
 Doun his braid back, frae his quhyt heid,  
 The silver wymplers grew.  
 Amaisit, I gaisit,  
 To se, led at command,  
 A stampant, and rampant,  
 Ferss lyon in his hand.

Again, in the twentieth stanza of *The Cherrie and the  
 Slae* Montgomerie thus expresses that thirst for liberty  
 which is so characteristic of Scottish verse from Barbour  
 to Burns :—

My hart ay did start ay  
 The fyrie flamis to flie :  
 Ay houping, throu louping,  
 To win to liberty.

And in the seventh stanza of *The Vision* Ramsay,  
 altering but not improving the image from a fire to a  
 flood, gives expression to the same sentiment—

Quhase mynds yet, inclyns yet,  
 To damm the rappid spate,

Devysing, and prysing,  
Freidom at ony rate.

Of Fergusson again,—the link of connection between Ramsay and Burns,—it may be said that although he seeks inspiration less from the elder *mackars*, or even from his immediate forerunner, than from the “winsome whistle” of the tender-souled Hamilton,\* whose occasional flashes of native power lit up the night of darkness which elapsed between 1615 and 1725—that joyless century which was illumined only by such passing meteors as Stirling and Drummond—he breaks, even more effectually than Ramsay, in whom at times the conventional feigning still lingers, the scholastic spell that had long held the northern muse in thrall, and returns to the unsophisticated life and nature which Dunbar and Douglas delineated, and to the use of the common language in which they wrote. Although he lacks the firm and vigorous tone of Burns, the language employed by him is, in spite of its singular softness and polish, much more purely Scottish than that of his mightier successor. And it may with safety be asserted that in the work of Fergusson alone there is more of genuine Scottish poetry than in the whole century of scholar-poets like Aytoun and others of the Restoration type who preceded him. It is true that we find in his easy artless versification evidence of precocious and sur-

\* See prefatory “Essay on the Genius of Fergusson,” *Poetical Works* (1879 ed.) p. cxxxiii.

prising talent rather than the ripe incomparable genius of the sixteenth-century singers. But his best productions show something of their grace and gaiety of imagination, and at times his homely picturings even reflect the sombre gleam of medieval romance. Essentially native in his genius and a painter of Scottish manners and landscape, Fergusson discovers the intense patriotism and quick original sensibility for nature which the older lyrists display; the same genuine humour, the same vein of pure pathos, the same philosophy of common sense applied to social life. Occasionally he even recurs to the antique style and forms of Scottish verse. The comic will or testament which gave an opportunity, under the pretence of friendly legacies, of satirising the vices or failings of contemporaries, had become exceedingly popular during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The first great French poet Francis Villon (1431-1489), with whom our own Dunbar had closer points of contact than with any other poet—his *Lament for the Makaris* shows indeed much external likeness to the celebrated *Ballades* of his French contemporary—had made a brilliant use of it in his *Lesser Testament* of 1456 and *Greater Testament* of 1461; and it was specially recommended by James VI. in his *Treatise of Scottis Poesie* of 1584.\* Excellent examples of it are to be found in Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid*, in Dunbar's macaronic *Testament of Maister Andro Kennedy*,

\* See Saintsbury *French Literature*, p. 79.

in Lyndsay's *Testament of Squire Meldrum*. And probably the latest specimen is the *Last Will and Codicil of Robert Fergusson*, which is humorous, but not satirical. We thus find that the old forms are adopted by him, and the native humour still survives in antique guise. And although it is probably difficult to find in his poems parallelisms of thought and sentiment, of structure and imagery such as those already noted in the case of Ramsay and 'Montgomerie, we instantly feel when we light upon such a passage as this, which I take almost at haphazard from his *Hame Content*, that the influence of the national nature-loving poets of the past is upon him, and that the same kind of power that animated their robuster muse is potently working in the feebler mind of their eighteenth-century successor:—

The Arno and the Tiber lang  
 Hae run fell clear in Roman sang ;  
 But, save the reverence o' schools,  
 They're baith but lifeless, dowie pools.  
 Dought they compare wi' bonnie Tweed,  
 As clear as ony lammer bead ?  
 Or are their shores mair sweet and gay  
 Than Fortha's haughs or banks o' Tay ?  
 Though there the herds can jink the showers.  
 'Mang thriving vines and myrtle bowers,  
 And blaw the reed to kittle strains,  
 While Echo's tongue commends their pains ;  
 Like ours, they canna warm the heart  
 Wi' simple, saft, bewitching art.  
 On Leader haughs and Yarrow braes  
 Arcadian herds wad tyne their lays,  
 To hear the mair melodious sounds

That live on our poetic grounds.  
Come, Fancy! come, and let us tread  
The simmer's flowery velvet bed,  
And a' your springs delightful lowse  
On Tweda's banks or Cowdenknowes,  
That, ta'en wi' thy enchanting sang,  
Our Scottish lads may round ye thrang,  
Sae pleased they'll never fash again  
To court you on Italian plain;  
Soon will they guess ye only wear  
The simple garb of nature here.

And all this applies with still greater force to Burns who never saw or heard "a jewel or tune of a thought or a feeling," but he instantly appropriated it and changed it into "something rich and rare."\* His whole verse is permeated with the intense and varied passion of the past. Not only do we discover in his swift, deft picturing the vivid power of the primary poets, but in the music and meaning of every part of his work we find traces of the home-reaching vividness of old Scottish art. Like seed floating in the air, the ideas, sentiments, and imagery of successive periods have taken root and sprung up anew in his more constraining and incisive verse. In plainer speech, he borrows from all quarters; and gradually his mind concentrates itself, frees itself from the limitations of the individual and particular, and manifests a strange power of modifying and centralising what it receives from others. The original matter is inseparably mixed up with that borrowed,

\* See Wilson *Recreations of Christopher North*, i. p. 205

assimilated, and remoulded according to the pattern of an inward ideal. Touched and lifted to a higher degree of expressiveness by his more musical and buoyant spirit, the thoughts and feelings embodied in the great central products of creative art in ruder ages become vibrant with the primitive power and passion of nature itself. He touches the characteristic motives and forms of the old romantic poetry with a spirit made subtle and fine by modern reflection. And of Burns, as truly as of Shakespeare, it may be said therefore, that he embodies a permanent type of the poetic temper, and is in fact the heir of all the ages, or "a centre for nature, running out threads of relation through everything." Whilst stretching far out beyond his temporal limit toward the coming group of Wordsworth, Scott, and Shelley, his thought and style perpetuate the past and all those great interests and mighty stirrings of the Scottish nation which moved and moulded the finely-fibred poets of the prime.

There is a sense indeed in which it may be said of Burns, and with greater truth than of Ramsay or Fergusson, that in dealing with his poetry we are dealing with an organism compact of many organisms. It is the compendium of all that the Past had brought to light; and furnishes a rare specimen of literary evolution circumscribed within well-defined limits of time and place. Confined to the conditions



of a single nation at a certain moment of its growth, we can yet trace in it vital links of connection with the intricate many-membered organism of poetic art that was slowly elaborated in Scotland during four preceding centuries. Burns represents the Scottish genius in its fullness; and by a happy coalescence of matter and style keeps alive the apostolic succession of poetic thought and invention. But the fire which burns so intensely in him, burns also in the less-known poets of the Stuart period and the subordinate lyrists of the seventeenth century, whose work would still sustain with decent splendour the honours of Scottish literature were the poems and songs of Burns obliterated from man's memory. All these predecessors exist for him, rather than for Ramsay and Fergusson, their descendants and intellectual successors, to whom, as we shall see, he was also largely indebted for those elements that give depth and breadth and versatility to his work. In a very special sense it is true that a whole nation laboured during long centuries of intellectual activity to give the world one Burns, in whom therefore there is naturally discernible not only the real radiance of his own epoch, but all the essential elements of that widely-diffused movement in the spirit of the nation which commenced with the love-poetry of James I., an accomplished master of that mediæval art which we see in the earlier poems of Chaucer, and reached a point of climax

with the social satire of Fergusson, whose *Scottish Poems* of 1773, which Burns accidentally met with at Irvine, led his mightier successor to "string anew his wildly-sounding lyre with emulating vigour" when, as himself confesses, he had bade farewell to the Muses.

The object of these remarks is to point out that the art of the Stuart era contained within itself the germ of that new type of art which only flourished at a later period with Burns, whose poetry, whilst subject to the spirit that controlled the Georgian age, derives its artistic potency and beauty from the accumulated learning and manifold experience of a foregone humanity, and, in spirit and form alike, bears obvious traces of deliberate imitation of the style and the matter of past masters of poetic craft. Verses written by Dunbar in the morning of the art are found to anticipate those written by Burns in its late afternoon. The student has little difficulty, for instance, in discovering striking resemblances in spirit and imagery between the *Dance of the Sevin Deidly Synnis*, or *Ane Ballat of the Fenyeit Freir of Tungland*, or *Hermes the Philosopher*, and *Tam o' Shanter*, or *Death and Dr Hornbook*, or the *Epistle to Davie*; whilst in *The Freiris of Berwik*, we may discover a parallel at times with *The Holy Fair*, and the reckless burlesque of the *Dirige to the King at Stirling* is found to be matched by, and anticipative of,

the daring satire of *Holy Willie's Prayer*. The poetic structure, again, which Montgomerie may be said to have fixed and nationalised in *The Cherrie and the Slae* is frequently employed by his eighteenth-century successor as an effective vehicle of emotional expression. The lines *To Ruin* and the *Ode on Despondency* may be cited as two out of numerous examples. The power and beauty of the Lowland and pastoral landscape of Scotland, first revealed with force and fulness by Ramsay, are reinforced and revived by the facile and vigorous pencil of Burns whose bright and moving pictures are direct from nature, and have an artistic finish and unity which the chief descriptions of Ramsay do not always possess. And when the poet of *The Gentle Shepherd* in a sentiment of inimitable tenderness and beauty thus expresses through Peggy at her parting with Patie the pure invincible passion of unsophisticated nature—

With every setting day and rising morn,  
I'll kneel to Heaven and ask thy safe return ;  
Under that tree, and on the suckler brae,  
Where aft we wont, when bairns, to rin and play ;  
And to the hizel-shaw, where first ye vow'd  
Ye wad be mine, and I as eithly trow'd,  
I'll aften gang, and tell the trees and flow'rs,  
Wi' joy, that they'll bear witness I am yours—

we discover the germ of that beautiful apostrophe with which Burns in *The Cottar's Saturday Night* concludes his simple picture of "blythe Jenny's" delicate and disinterested love—

O happy love ! where love like this is found !  
 O heart-felt raptures ! bliss beyond compare ! . . . .  
 If Heaven a draught of Heavenly pleasure spare,  
 One cordial in this melancholy vale,  
 'Tis when a youthful, loving, modest pair,  
 In other's arms breathe out the tender tale,  
 Beneath the milk-white thorn that scents the ev'ning gale.

The forms again which Fergusson created or adapted and popularised in *Leith Races*, and *The Farmer's Ingle*, and *The Mutual Complaint of Plainstones and Causey*, are those used for similar purposes and with equal effect in *The Holy Fair*, and *The Cottar's Saturday Night*, and the immortal tale of *The Twa Dogs*. Not only does Burns borrow the forms of his forerunner, but he makes the freest use of his characteristic sentiments and humour. His verses to *The Mouse* or *The Mountain Daisy* recall Fergusson's pretty *Ode to the Gowdspink*. Compare, again, this concluding stanza of the poem called *Braid-Claith*—

For thof ye had as wise a snout on,  
 As Shakespeare or Sir Isaac Newton,  
 Your judgment fouk wud hae a doubt on,  
     I'll tak' my aith,  
 Till they cou'd see ye wi' a suit on  
     O' gude Braid Claith.—

with this from Burns's *Epistle to John Kennedy* of 1785:—

Now if ye're ane o' warl's folk,  
 Wha rate the wearer by the cloak,  
 An' sklent on poverty their joke,  
     Wi' bitter sneer,  
 Wi' you no friendship I will troke  
     Nor cheap nor dear.

Read in the light of *The Farmer's Ingle* every line of *The Cottar's Saturday Night*, which I regard as the most hallowed of all Scottish poems, discovers the influence exerted by Fergusson on the master-mind, whilst the commencement of *The Holy Fair* is so close a copy of the opening stanzas of *Leith Races* that none but a genius of consummate strength and daring would have ventured on such an appropriation. Fergusson commences thus :—

In July month, ae bonny morn,  
 When Nature's rokelay green  
 Was spread owre ilka rig o' corn  
 To charm our rovin' een ;  
 Glow'rin' about, I saw a quean,  
 The fairest 'neath the lift :  
 Her een were o' the siller sheer,  
 Her skin, like snawy drift,  
 Sae white that day.

Quo' she, " I ferly unco sair,  
 That ye sud musin' gae ;  
 Ye wha hae sung o' Hallow Fair,  
 Her winter pranks, an' play ;  
 When on Leith-sands the racers rare  
 Wi' Jocky louns are met,  
 Their orra pennies there to ware,  
 And drown themsel's in debt  
 Fu' deep that day."

" And wha are ye, my winsome dear,  
 That tak's the gate sae early ?  
 Whare do ye win, gin ane may speer,  
 For I right meikle ferly,  
 That sic braw buskit laughin' lass  
 Thir bonny blinks shou'd gie, .

## THE HERITAGE OF BURNS.

And loup, like Hebe, owre the grass,  
 As wanton, and as free,  
 Frae dool this day?"

" I dwell amang the cauler springs  
 That weet the Land o' Cakes,  
 And aften tune my canty strings  
 At bridals and late-wakes.  
 They ca' me Mirth ;—I ne'er was ken'd  
 To grumble or look sour :  
 But blithe wad be a lift to lend,  
 Gif ye wad sey my power,  
 And pith, this day."

Now compare this with the exordium of *The Holy Fair* :

Upon a simmer Sunday morn,  
 When Nature's face is fair,  
 I walked forth to view the corn,  
 An' snuff the caller air.  
 The risin' sun, owre Galston muirs,  
 Wi' glorious light was glintin' ;  
 The hares were hirplin down the furrs,  
 The lav'rocks they were chantin'  
 Fu' sweet that day.

As lightsomely I glow'r'd abroad,  
 To see a scene sae gay,  
 Three Hizzies, early at the road,  
 Cam' skelpin' up the way.  
 Twa had manteeles o' dolefu' black,  
 But ane wi' lyart lining ;  
 The third, that gaed a wee a-back,  
 Was in the fashion shining  
 Fu' gay that day.

The twa appear'd like sisters twin,  
 In feature, form, an' claes ;

Their visage wither'd, lang an' thin,  
     An' sour as ony slae's :  
 The third cam' up, hap-step-an'-lowp,  
     As light as ony lambie,  
 And wi' a curchie low did stoop,  
     As soon as e'er she saw me,  
         Fu' kind that day.

Wi' bonnet aff, quoth I, " Sweet lass,  
     I think ye seem to ken me ;  
 I'm sure I've seen that bonnie face,  
     But yet I canna name ye."  
 Quoth she, an' laughin' as she spak,  
     An' tak's me by the han's,  
 " Ye, for my sake, hae gi'en the feck  
     Of a' the ten comman's  
         A screed some day.

" My name is Fun—your cronie dear,  
     The nearest friend ye hae ;  
 An' this is Superstition here,  
     An' that's hypoerisy.  
 I'm gaun to Mauchline Holy Fair,  
     To spend an' hour in daffin ;  
 Gin ye go there, yon runkl'd pair,  
     We will get famous laughin'  
         At them this day."

But sufficient has been said in support of the proposition that, broadly considered, the same kind of power is exhibited in all the poetic productions that date from Dunbar to Burns ; and that in a very special sense the poetry of the latter, who makes a singularly free use of the materials of his predecessors, must be regarded as a natural development in the line of purely Scottish taste and

æsthetic feeling. This, as I have said, is the inevitable result of desultory dipping into choice and popular passages. But we must not neglect the difference between Burns's method and that of his precursors. When we come to have a deeper and fuller acquaintance with them, when we have studied their works in various lights, we recognise immeasurable differences. The disparities indeed are found far to outnumber the resemblances. And oftentimes this discovery goes a long way towards negating the too-prevalent assumption of Burns's unassailable superiority. Copious examples might be cited in proof of this ; one, however, will here suffice. The rival impersonations of Mirth and Fun in *Leith Races* and *The Holy Fair* have many points of resemblance ; yet the one is far from being a laboured imitation of the other ; and certainly no competent critic would ever think of placing the Fun of Burns before the Mirth of Fergusson in point of merit. Of all Scottish poets Burns,—always peculiarly susceptible to influences from the verse of older singers,—attains an easy pre-eminence as the light-footed and light-fingered Autolycus who set the country air a-ringing with sprightly melodies, borrowed or stolen with deliberate forethought from every accessible source, but always adapted to wider-reaching uses with the inevitable rightness of an aspiring genius. If he pilfers freely, that is, he also wields a wand that usually transmutes at a touch things



of fact into the airy substance of a vision. But, as in the instance given above, he does not always improve upon his models even when these are furnished by poets who possess so much less than himself of technical skill and the vital spirit of harmony. In short, we gradually come to see that each poet from Dunbar to Burns, whilst possessing the distinctive qualities of Scottish art, applies a different kind of power to the expression of the same thought, to the conception and working out of a character of similar type, to the interpretation of natural scenes which all alike have selected for artistic handling; and that the sum of these individualities simply exceeds all power of calculation.

#### IV.

BUT, some reader may here say, no precursor of Burns could make the shadow of a claim to be his equal in the lyrical sphere. And that is undoubtedly true. But sound and rational criticism is careful to emphasise the fact that even in this direction there were other men among our national poets justly entitled to be called great. If not exactly the Columbus of a new literary world, Burns at least emancipated the mind and art of his countrymen from classical notions of stiff decorum, and by his fresh and fearless representations of the

passionate life of the Scottish peasantry—its ups and downs, its joys and sorrows, its shrinkings and darings, pictured and placed before men's eyes in swift and dazzling succession—opened up infinite possibilities to the poets who succeeded him. But whilst he thus found the materials of his tragic and comic delineations in contemporary life, the fidelity and delicacy of these picturings were at least foreshadowed by the early poets of the Stuart period whose spirit was in some respects different, and who felt and sang of this world in strains very unlike his own. His work, fairly considered, was the natural development of theirs when, relieved from the restraining influences of a ruder and less liberal age, it realised in lyrics of spontaneous and unreflecting emotion the pure symbolism of human life and feeling in the natural world. Whilst, therefore, pre-eminent as a lyrist, and the real progenitor of a new order of poetry that recognised the higher vision and the lofty flight which reached perfection in the seer-like imagination of Wordsworth, Burns furnishes the most convincing demonstration of the fact that no poet stands isolated and alone, without support and without lineage. Even he is essentially prehensile; confessedly clinging to the Past for nourishment, and drawing from the ancient founts of pure lyrical inspiration, which never failed even in the period of greatest obscurity from 1603 to 1725, the virtue that was

necessary to sustain his more soaring genius. In revolt from the canons of art accepted at the time, Burns, whilst asserting his independence, could yet speak with warmest gratitude of the indispensable helpfulness of his unambitious forerunners who showed little inclination for the loftier flights of poetry. In spite of Ramsay's vapid classicalities, and his froward trick of speaking, in the Pope and Thomson style of poetic diction, of Scottish lads and lasses as Damon and Phyllis and Chloris, of the sun as Phœbus and the moon as Cynthia, and making his lovers vow fidelity by Jove and Pallas, he accepted him as a master and a model from whom came true snatches of the old Stuart strain and genuine outpourings of the old satiric spirit of Dunbar and Lyndsay. After lamenting the scarcity of true pastoral poets in the then nascent literature of Scotland, he breaks out into this hearty strain in which, however, the old Philomel spirit of Pope's day still lingers :—

Yes ! there is ane, a Scottish callan—  
 There's ane ; come forrit, honest Allan !  
 Thou need na jouk behint the hallan,  
     A chiel sae clever ;  
 The teeth o' Time may gnaw Tantallon,  
     But thou's for ever !

Thou paints auld Nature to the nines,  
 In thy sweet Caledonian lines ;  
 Nae gowden stream thro' myrtles twines,  
     Where Philomel,  
 While nightly breezes sweep the vines,  
     Her griefs will tell !

And in the *Epistle to Lapraik* (April 1, 1785) he cries :—

O, for a spunk o' Allan's glee,  
 Or Fergusson's, the bauld an' slee,  
 Or bright Lapraik's, my friend to be,  
                                   If I can hit it !  
 That would be lear enough for me,  
                                   If I could get it.

As a creative artist Burns does not, it is true, come into the world mortgaged to the opinions of his precursors or contemporaries. But still the element of necessity is not excluded from his work. He borrows from humanity and creates only as the spirit of nature creates around him. It works in him as it worked in those who went before him ; as it works abroad in those among whom his lot is cast. The distinctive influence of the Scottish muse from Barbour to Ramsay is traceable throughout his songs. In points of structure and diction, in types of character and shades of local colouring, they realise and express in a concentrated form the bright and lurid, the brilliant and passionate features of the primitive stock. Much of him is actually held in mortmain by nameless makers who had moulded into dust centuries before his advent. The "simple artless lays of other times" provide poetic nutriment for his versatile genius and live anew in his more highly organised artistic forms. Burns cannot escape from his intellectual ancestors. Their likeness continually flashes out in his features. Whilst working by an exercise of creative power as genuine as that of Nature

herself, he does not stand out quite alone in his grandeur. He cannot emancipate himself from his age, as we have seen; neither can he keep his intellect uninfluenced by the past workings of the human mind. In a singular degree he exemplifies the fact that there is discoverable a deep and true communion of thought and feeling in the minds and hearts of all national poets. The greatness of each and all is found in the final analysis to be conditioned quite as much on a receptivity that is unlimited as on a capacity that is innately wise. Here, as everywhere, in spite of disparities of talent and position, the law of mutual dependence comes into play; the union of all minds appears intimate in their very majesty and solitariness; and our sympathy reveals to us their sense and connection.

## V.

THE poetry of Burns may be considered, therefore, as the bridge thrown over the stream of time, which unites the modern and medieval world. It furnishes the best possible illustration of that true doctrine of conservative evolution in social life, and in poetic literature which is essentially a social art, on which I have already expatiated. But the importance of this fact is continually lost sight of. Men talk, glibly rather than wisely, of Burns's immediate inspiration or absolute invention, as if, like Thomas the Rhymour in the old legend, he had

been gifted by the Queen of Fairy with the faculties of music and of song. They forget that his originality was decidedly eclectic—an originality informed with many memories of the old reciters and makers of the Stuart era, and showing signs of many influences derived from the legendary melody of the ancient ballads and romances of those unknown minstrels “who saved other names and left their own unsung” by preserving and cherishing during the seventeenth century the incidents, fancies, and feelings of the past in the glens of the Yarrow, the Teviot, and the Tweed. These were the elements that early stimulated to sustained activity the emotional and imaginative genius of Burns. And when men speak of his “artless and untutored genius”—an unfortunate phrase that instantly recalls the obvious taint of intellectual assumption in Milton’s equally mistaken characterisation of Shakespeare when in *L’Allegro* he speaks perversely of his “native wood-notes wild”—they simply display an inexcusable ignorance not only of the history of Scottish literature but of the life and expressed opinions of Burns himself whose best ideas are oftentimes and avowedly “but dressings of a former sight.”

Burns is in no sense the creator of Scottish song. On the contrary, his poetry is in many respects but a modern echo of the primal melody of Dunbar and Montgomerie and the seventeenth-century lyrists. His liquid and prevailing melodies sound the supreme and sovereign

notes of the true song-bird. Like it, he makes for himself a central space of silence in the lyrical sphere which is also his native air, his true and permanent home. He can throw his whole soul into the breath of a gentle or passionate emotion, and embody it in the most melodic phrases; and that it need hardly be said is the essence of a true lyric. In free and vital musicalness the poems of Burns are unsurpassed, and, on the whole, I think, unequalled by any others in Scottish literature. Nevertheless the improvisation-theory of poetry altogether fails here. For although we have in his most impassioned lyrics the restless heart-hunger, the swift and strenuous flight of the lark-winged symbol of that divine unrest which continually agitates the poet's soul—and those panting rhythms or perfect cadences of its mounting and earth-spurning music that are prelude of the long warbling trills and "dying fall" with which the rich and subtly sweet notes of its rapturous hymnings suddenly dissolve in the quivering air, it is obvious that Burns's best music is not always the unpurposed result of spontaneous inspiration. In his productive moods he seems to sing from an irresistible impulse of nature. His enthusiasm for the poetical art is supported by the rarest literary gifts; and the visions that come within the eye and prospect of his soul seem as full of life "as though they lived indeed." Every thought and feeling, as it arises, is perfectly reflected in the magical mirror of his harmonious verse. Yet at times one discovers an over-

elaboration of details, an indulgence in discursive episodes, an accumulation of trivial conceits, strained metaphors, and far-fetched illustrations which point to an assiduous ingenuity rather than to the spontaneous inspiration of ardent and unreflecting poetical feeling. And in certain of his more ambitious efforts, when he is obviously striving with a noble perseverance after a lofty ideal, one feels everywhere the *limæ labor*, and never quite loses the sense of cumulative and painful effort involved in their production. In short, there is much in his art which indicates the union of consummate literary skill with inborn lyrical genius. And it is only indiscreet and uninformed admirers who speak without qualification of his "profuse strains of *unpremeditated* art." He has himself sternly repudiated the claim suggested by such a phrase, and confessed to his careful elaboration of productions inspired by ancient models. He knew and acknowledged his indebtedness to the song-writers of past ages, of whom he constantly spoke with reverence and affection. And, as we discover from one of his letters to George Thomson, it was to him a matter of unceasing regret that their names and memory could not be rescued from oblivion. Take this beautiful passage from his earliest *Journal* which proves the fact beyond all possible cavil, and at the same time shows that Burns, when thoroughly aroused, could write pure English prose as well as the fustian which he addressed as the love-poet Sylvander to Clarinda :—

There is a noble sublimity, a heart-melting tenderness, in some of



our ancient ballads, which show them to be the work of a masterly hand: and it has often given me many a heart ache to reflect, that such glorious old bards—bards who very probably owed all their talents to native genius, yet have described the exploits of heroes, the pangs of disappointment, and the meltings of love, with such fine strokes of nature—that their very names (O how mortifying to a bard's vanity!) are now "buried among the wreck of things which were." O ye illustrious names unknown! who could feel so strongly and describe so well; the last, the meanest of the Muse's train—one who, though far inferior to your flights, yet eyes your path, and with trembling wing would sometimes soar after you,—a poor rustic bard, unknown, pays this sympathetic pang to your memory! Some of you tell us, with all the charms of verse, that you have been unfortunate in the world—unfortunate in love; he too has felt the loss of his little fortune, the loss of friends, and, worse than all, the loss of the woman he adored. Like you, all his consolation was his muse: She taught him in rustic measures to complain. Happy could he have done it with your strength of imagination and flow of verse! May the turf lie lightly on your bones! and may you now enjoy that solace and rest which this world rarely gives to the heart tuned to all the feelings of poesy and love.

In range and depth of emotional and imaginative genius, as in points of artistic resource and technical ability, Burns's supremacy is indeed sufficiently assured. But his versatility is even more remarkable than his originality. And it is neither less nor more than a wilful falsifying of history to speak of him as the well-head of our national song. It is right and proper that due prominence should be given to the unusual breadth of his sympathies, the singular variety of his interests, the exceptional largeness and exuberant vitality of his whole nature. These, with an unrivalled power of presenting with vivid truthfulness all the salient aspects of human life, and

especially the picturesque, humorous, or pathetic varieties of the common lot, are the qualities which give him a place apart in the ideal and immortal kingdom of supreme creative art. But it must always be borne in mind that pioneers had gone before Burns. And although he still remains the great discoverer and reformer who evoked and strengthened by the vital touch of his regenerating power the marvellous and mingled experiences of the richly-storied past, and indeed occupies a position of almost lonely grandeur in the completeness of his lyrical work, it is impossible for the competent critic to treat seriously the claim advanced on his behalf in certain quarters — namely, that by right of imperial command over all the resources of imaginative and emotional insight and expression he is the sole creator of Scottish song. The student of Burns's life, the sincere admirer of his genius, is forced to strike a much lower keynote. The actual achievements and ideal possibilities of native art before the advent of Ramsay have not melted so thoroughly into the blue haze of distant horizons or become mere matters of vague tradition, as to prevent us from estimating the force exerted on the mind of Burns by the fresh and vigorous fancy of those bards who lived and sang even before the bonds of feudal authority and Romish domination that forcibly repressed the expansion of the national genius had been effectually broken, or from rightly determining his exact position in the history

of Scottish literature. Living long after the overthrow of those barriers which mediæval ignorance and prejudice had raised and maintained against the spread of knowledge and the spirit of free inquiry, Burns had naturally a riper experience of the great issues of life, a fuller perception of the deeper springs of goodness in human nature, and a firmer hold of those virtues of invincible fidelity and unwearied love which form the staple of the lyrist's art. From his fuller realisation of these things he derived not only a feeling of severe but consolatory calm as a man, but new stimulus and power as a singer. But his primary use and function really consisted in adapting, purifying, and reorganising in his richly modulated verse the spirit and the forms of lyrical art which had already been clearly discriminated and evolved in the earlier stages of our literary history.

As regards form Burns's poetry was essentially a continuation of the popular poetry of Scotland which harmonised with his particular way of looking at the world. He combined the rich poetical materials already prepared into more perfect forms, and carried them to the highest point of ideal development, so as to make any advance impossible in point of spontaneity or emotional intensity, on such kindling and quickening songs as *Green grow the Rashes, O*, and *Ye Banks and Braes*, and *My Nannie, O*, or *John Anderson, my Jo*, and *Of a' the airts the wind*

*can blaw*, or the farewell to Clarinda and the death-bed verses to Jessie Lewars, which are characterised by an unequalled vivacity of actual sensation, and have besides broken gleams and spirit-shaking murmurs as of another world. To find his equal in this the main department of his art, we must go indeed to the ancients, who sound a full note of human love and human woe: to the air and fire and fluent grace of Sappho, the concentrated simplicity and delicate pathos of Catullus, the passionate depths of conception and play of fancy revealed in the lyrics and elegies of the Anthology. His structural skill in the handling of old-world melodies, and the copious and expressive diction, the freshness and pregnancy of verbal combination in his original lyrics, which possess the throbbing fulness and breathing beauty of Nature herself, are the qualities in which Burns is literally unsurpassed by any Scottish song-writer who either preceded or followed him. In the faculty of invention and the variety of metres, he surpassed Henryson, albeit he was his inferior in sustained purity of moral tone; Dunbar,—his equal in satire and in sarcasm, as in moral and religious poetry,—in lyric fire and sympathetic charm, in the poetry of love and pathos and natural imagery; Douglas in picturesque touch and pastoral sweetness, and even in narrative interest; Lyndsay,—like him, pre-eminent as a people's-poet,—in changing and moulding the mind of his

contemporaries by the aweless audacities of his bright and sparkling verse, and in leading on to a new state of political and religious feeling; Montgomerie in direct dealing with the aspects of free nature in the scenery of Scotland, or in the power of investing the common objects and lowly pursuits of everyday life with images of rare and lively beauty; Ramsay,—admired and patronised, as the most interesting and influential literary personage in the first half of the eighteenth century, by Pope, Swift, Steele, Arbuthnot, and Gay,\*—in grandeur and sublimity, and even in festive humour and native strength of comic powers which in some respects are not widely disproportionate to those of Chaucer and Boccaccio; and Fergusson,—the city spark whose precocious performances were the starting-points of Burns's noblest triumphs,—in patriotic fervour, in genial and reflective humour, in felicity of nature-interpretation. And having thus distanced the utmost efforts of his predecessors in song-craft, he took his own independent way—albeit some of his best efforts are marked by the dominant literary influences of the time—and reigned to the end without a rival in that world of supreme lyrical art which he re-discovered and reformed. But all the more salient qualities which adorn and distinguish his work are to be found, separately or in combination, in one or other of the poets

\* See Lord Woodhouselee *An Essay on Ramsay's Genius and Writings* (Works, ed. 1848), p. 78.

named ; more thinly scattered, no doubt, less sublimely exhibited, it is true, but still there. Nay more ; Burns, as I have throughout implied, did not hesitate to combine in his own verse the imagination, tradition, and mythic fancy of the early Scottish poets who lived and sang between 1450 and 1725.

## VI.

Now to perceive and admit this is not to disparage Burns. We do not belittle our greatest lyric when, thinking of Henryson and Dunbar, the highest and brightest of the Stuart brotherhood, whose transcripts from the life of their own time are indestructible because they constantly kept touch with human nature ; or the seventeenth-century singers who adhered closely to the life before their eyes, and produced vivid poetical picturings that are curiously anticipative of the naturalism of the Georgian era ; or the modern revivalists Ramsay and Fergusson who, whilst occasionally imitating the products of antique art, initiated and completed a new process of their own, we say that the contributions of these native-bred writers who put their impressions into vernacular Scottish during the whole period from the middle of the fifteenth century to the Reformation and onwards, would alone have rendered classic the language in which they were written had Burns never written at all. They

not only represent the living period of the true Scottish language, but their work in almost every particular is marked with the grey-streaked dawnings of that modern descriptive art which reached its culminating point in the richer and more glowing verse of Burns.\* Than this, however, no fact has been more studiously overlooked by critics of Burns from Carlyle to Le Gallienne. Whilst praising work that is indubitably better, work that is certainly *good*—work which bears throughout the stamp of emotional intensity and intellectual power—is slighted by them. Even Taine treats men of distinct original genius like James I., Henryson, and Lyndsay, as commonplace singers or “rhyming chroniclers.” And Lowell, after speaking comprehensively of the pre-Reformation poets as bores, dismisses Dunbar,—he observe whom Sir Walter Scott calls “the excellent poet, unrivalled by any which Scotland ever produced,”—with the remark that “whoso is national enough to like thistles may browse there to his heart’s content.” Instead of regarding Scotland as a nation of poets, with Dunbar, the genuine successor of Chaucer, lighting up the dusky firmament of fifteenth-century letters with “cressets of immortal fire,” and our oldest extant songs dating as far back as 1600, whilst precious scraps of unidentified lyrical poetry, coeval with the victory of Bannockburn (1314), are included in our minstrelsy, critics speak of it as a nation with one poet who took the world by storm in 1786, at which period Burns’s

\* See Veitch *ut supra* i., 219, 250.

literary life properly begins. In the blindness of their idolatry they forget the long and vigorous evolution of our lyrical poetry; and assume that instead of being born into an age and country with "an atmosphere of legendary melody" floating everywhere around him and supplying the necessary nutriment for his expanding genius, Burns sprang out in the full maturity of his powers, unaided by precursors, into the clear light of history, like Pallas from the brain of Zeus. So great is their appreciation of the perfect melodies of the master-mind that they give no thought to the old lineage of those simple words of the elder lyrists and a foregone humanity which Burns only imitated,—as Horace and Catullus imitated or directly translated in their Odes and Elegies the lost lyrists of Greece,—and re-uttered in a music of deeper, clearer, more varied compass. Or, if they remember them at all, they give but scant justice to those nameless and forgotten song-makers whose light-hearted merriment, devout pathos, and infinite tenderness of touch supplied the poet of our special predilection with what I can only call the impulse of a miscellaneous inspiration.

The power of Burns showed itself chiefly in the new and unlooked-for way in which he touched into life old truths, or transmuted matter-of-fact into matter-of-meaning. He rose above all differences of experience, and, at times, pierced with eagle's wing the highest heaven of invention. And he towers above every other



Scottish poet not only as the improver of old songs but as the creator of new ones. His art, indeed, embraces the widest variety of human experience—for nothing affecting humanity was alien either to his heart or brain—and combines in harmonious union the widest range of qualities. It has all the irresistible charms that belong to pathos and passion, simplicity, strangeness, and salience of presentation. But in the history of Scottish literature, Burns cannot be said to stand to his successors—without whom, be it observed in passing, we should probably miss much that lay implicit in the art of Burns—in the relation which Marlowe, the father and founder of our stage, holds to Shakespeare in the history of English drama. By which is meant that he was not in the truest sense a pioneer and maker like Marlowe, or a morning star of song like Chaucer, or the young Apollo of his age and nation like either of these two poets of the Pagan Renaissance, Wyatt and Surrey, the founders of our lyrical poetry, who have been called, with singular felicity of epithet, “the Dioscuri of the Dawn.” In the lyrical sphere he undoubtedly vitalised and dominated the collective energies of his countrymen. And that holds as true to-day, indeed, as it did when Henry Mackenzie (1745-1831) wrote his prescient and discriminating notice of the Kilmarnock poems in *The Lounger* of 9th December 1786. But the qualities which give distinction to his art—blasphemy as the assertion may seem to some adorers of Burns—did not belong to him

as an individual. They were the current property of the nation and the whole period which literally overflowed with the noblest poetical traditions. Burns was no simple spring that suddenly burst out in a barren period of our literary history, but a deep reservoir wherein other springs from the well-heads of intellectual life had for centuries been gradually discharging their several fertilising streams.

Goethe has a sentence which hits the core of this matter. Speaking of Burns, he asks:—"How is he great, except through the circumstance that the whole songs of his predecessors lived in the mouth of the people—that they were, so to speak, sung at his cradle; that, as a boy, he grew up amongst them, and the high excellence of these models so pervaded him that he had therein a living basis on which he could proceed further."\* In other words, the triumphant claim of his genius lay in the power which it possessed of working old materials into forms of unsuspected beauty. The broad mirth-songs, the native tales of sly humour, the beautiful but anonymous ballads that form the antique minstrelsy of Scotland—those "Iliads without an Homer" which were dear to the patriotic heart of Burns; the very things which ploughmen chaunted in the furrows, and milkmaids hummed over the dew-sprent meadows, and blithe reapers and sheaf-binders sang

\* See *Conversations of Goethe with Eckermann and Soret* (3 May 1827), ed. 1875, p. 254.

together on the hairst-rigs of Ayrshire—these were the true and never-failing sources of his lyrical inspiration. They touched with fire the early genius of Burns and became the models of his own imperishable songs because they expressed everything that a fervent poetic imagination, nature-nursed, could care for or revel in, and embodied in simple phrases that had the pure æsthetical charm which nature wears certain forms of feeling that had a necessary and eternal existence in the human heart. He studied them minutely and lovingly among the heather of the moors and the hill-side ; hummed them to old Scottish airs—that plaintive or passionate heart-music which had burst out in warlike centuries and been transmitted by wandering minstrels through many generations—as he drove his plough between the brown furrows or mused upon the crimson-tipped flower, a glittering eye among the upturned clods, that he and Chaucer loved so rarely. And at night in his cheerless garret-room at Mount Oliphant he invented forms and ideas to harmonise with these plaintive or pawky old-world strains ; now creating something which might be said to be absolutely new, and again making a new use of what already existed ;—“ piercing dead things with inbreathed sense,” or refashioning and anew idealising those fair flowers of fancy that are forever changing and evolving new products in a sweet unbroken series of perennial bloom.

Burns felt deeply and acknowledged frankly the power

of the gradual rediscovery and revelation of the Scottish songs and ballads which had been floating in oral tradition from the time of Henry the Minstrel (1420-1493)—the early perusal of whose famous epic of *The Wallace* (1460) in the paraphrased and perverted version of Hamilton of Gilbertfield (1722) touched with patriotic flame his yearning heart—and which had been published for the first time, partly by Watson in his *Chaise Collection of Comic and Serious Scots Poems* (1706-1711), which may be said to have marked the dawn of the new period, and was at least to the Scottish poetry of the eighteenth century what the remarkable work known as *Tottel's Miscellany* (1557) was to the English poetry of the sixteenth; and partly by Ramsay in *The Tea-Table Miscellany* and *The Evergreen* of 1724, the great seminal works of eighteenth-century poetry in Scotland. "The collection of songs," himself says, —referring probably either to Watson's book, or the *Scots Nightingale*, the second edition of which appeared in 1779, or, still more probably, to the series of Scots and English lyrics published under the title of *The Lark* in 1765, —"was my *vade mecum*. I pored over them driving my cart, or walking to labour, song by song, verse by verse, carefully noting the true, tender, or sublime, from affectation or fustian; and I am convinced I owe to this practice much of my critic-craft, such as it is."\*

\* Burns *Autobiography*, 1787: Currie p. 13. See also Gray, *Cursory Remarks on Scottish Song*, No. 3; and Stenhouse, *Notes and Illustrations to the Museum of Johnson*, 1839, iv. 359.

A perpetual borrower, like Chaucer and Shakespeare and Milton, and the nameless song-writers of his own country who preceded him, Burns seized upon those jewels of thought and feeling which would have passed away into the oblivion that lies on the unlocalised graves of the native minstrels who gave birth to them, had he not spiritually interfused them with his own immortal lyrics which breathe the fine free healthful spirit of the past, and yet lift us to a higher sphere.

The more we study Burns then in his own works, the more do we perceive that his predecessors exist for him. Doubtless his very first essays show him in possession of a style peculiarly his own, representative of his own temperament, and destined by its force and fervour of phrase and feeling to revolutionise the practice of elder lyrists. But in the main the spirit he reveals is the same as that embodied in the old snatches of song which he transfigured and transformed, and the forms he employs are, as we have seen, those which were commonly used by his precursors. The quality of his work, as I have throughout implied, is usually so incommensurable by any standard that can be applied to the best of theirs, that one can hardly be blamed for regarding the songs of Burns as not only different in kind but different in inspiration. But the fact remains that without these predecessors he would never have been what he was—an inspiring and beneficent force in the national literature and in

the national life—any more than Chaucer would have been what he was without the Latins, the Troubadours, the Trouvères, and the Italians, from whom he derived his wealth of poetical suggestion and literary culture. Having Burns, who purified the streams of popular poetry, we might, it is true, well afford to lose the majority of the nameless bards who lived and sang in the seventeenth century. Yet they all lead up to him; and, strictly speaking, help to explain his aims and methods. Like every great poet from Chaucer to Tennyson, he borrowed of tradition the poetic diction in which he so effectively described Man and Nature, and worked by selection and exclusion on the whole mass of material that lay ready to his hand. And, in the sense in which I am now writing, his greatness really consisted in rescuing from oblivion much of the choicest of our old lyrical poetry, in vivifying suggested thought with the fire of passion, and bringing to artistic ripeness the type established by his predecessors, rather than in creating a new kind of poetry; in breathing a creator's breath of life into the rude figures of pre-existent story, in marrying the sweetest of our old-world musical strains to immortal verse of his own, and thus raising to its highest potency and beauty the lyric and idyllic verse already invented for him, rather than in opening up a new literary world, or greatly deviating, as an innovator or reformer, from the poetic traditions of the Scottish School of Modern Romance which really came into being after

the Jacobite rising of 1715 with the original or recoted work of Allan Ramsay.

## VII.

NOTWITHSTANDING the modern tendencies so strongly exhibited in Burns's verse, the fact remains then that instead of being the founder of a dynasty like Waller or Pope, as is sometimes assumed, he is the heir to a flourishing poetic tradition like Wordsworth and Scott, who in different ways reap the fruit of his reconstructive labours. He is not only the outcome of his age and environment, as Spenser was, but an artist who consciously derives his strength and symmetry from a numerous ancestry, as the more eclectic Shakespeare did. He is at once the result of local and peculiar conditions—his broad Doric provincialism is sufficient evidence of that—and the product of immediate fore-runners deliberately imitated, like Ramsay and Fergusson, and of remote forbears endowed with great initiating and planning genius, like Dunbar and Douglas, whose main impulse came from Chaucer, the first great poet that used the English language, who was himself formed in the school of Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, of Dante and Petrarca, and the son and heir therefore of a great family of Trouvères and Italian poets. If Burns is the best expression of the old Scots world and the mouthpiece of nascent

humanity, a poet who interprets the inmost soul of the Lowland peasantry in intensely Scottish verse that in sentiment and diction is remarkably free from those touches of vulgarity which tarnish the thought and dialect of Ramsay and Fergusson, he is also by reason of this the last representative of that school of poetry which was firmly established in the fifteenth century—the living period of the true Scottish language—by writers like Dunbar and Henryson who, like Burns, stood in close contact with real life, and whose traditions were carried forward to the Georgian era by the nameless lyrists of the song-books. But for these representatives of the lyric movement initiated and transmitted by the courtly, quick-witted and unmistakably Scotch poets of the Stuart period, indeed, Burns never could have been. All creative and enduring art, as I have attempted to show,—even that which is least fettered by æsthetic formulæ—is necessarily a convention of some sort. And Burns, in spite of his modernism of spirit and individuality of style, belongs to the perturbed race of giants of the older dispensation. He is intensely modern, that is, yet ardently antique. He looks bravely forward, singing

With mouth of gold, and morning in his eyes ;

but in his finest flights he also harks back, and catches the inspiration of the old amatory verse, and of that world of beauty, enveloped and glorified by



an atmosphere of minstrelsy, which Mediæval and Renaissance literature had opened up to view.

And this leads me to remark that the opportuneness of Burns's poetry is as undeniable as its strength and intensity, its breadth of sympathy and sense of humour, or its vivid contact with actual life—the qualities which give reality and power to his representations. He made his appearance, in other words, at a time singularly favourable for his reception not only as a Scottish, but as a British, poet. And it is remarkable that, although later English critics have been slow to perceive this fact, it was frankly admitted by Cowper, who became acquainted with the poems of Burns within the first year of their publication, and generously confirmed the verdict pronounced concerning them by The Man of Feeling in the *Lounger* of December 1786, as already noted. Eight-and-thirty years had elapsed since the death of Thomson, a poet of high rank who in Pope's day had greatly enlarged the range of poetic observation, who had recalled men to an imaginative study of external objects, and even celebrated Nature in terms of impassioned simplicity and truth that are sometimes as full of sweet human emotion as Burns's own. Ramsay, who fostered the nascent curiosity regarding the strange fugitive melodies and simple lyric literature of past ages, and by means of his own loosely-kilted songs restored Scottish poetry to her native garb after the lapse of a century,

had died full of years and honours shortly before his mightier successor first saw the light in the clay-built cottage on the banks of Doon. And in the year following the birth of Burns the pathetic flute-like melodies of Collins, a divine and aerial poet of purest lyric note who sang in artless numbers and with no sense of strain for his own delight, had been hushed or ever. The uneventful life of Gray, probably the most important English poet as regards pomp of style or "crepuscular moral splendour" between Pope and Wordsworth, had closed at Cambridge fifteen years before Burns's first literary venture—a thin octavo volume in blue boards—was issued from the Kilmarnock press of John Wilson. And the year (1774) in which rest and peace came to the troubled brain and sore-saddened heart of Fergusson, who cherished and preserved "the relict Muse, o' Mither-Lied" (mother tongue) which Ramsay had restored, was that in which the bright and happy genius of Goldsmith gave its last pathetic flicker in the faithful and friendly satire called *Retaliation*. Johnson, who dignified the minor morals of the Addisonian age in animated and colloquial poetry written in the manner of Pope, but soon forsook verse for the prose that raised his fame to its full height, had died in 1784, two years before Burns's literary life commenced. And although the *Poetical Sketches* had appeared in 1783 and *The Task* in 1785, the public, long accustomed to critical and so-called classical poetry,

had been slow to discover that since the deaths of Herrick and Vaughan no music of such force and originality had filled the English air as that which issued spontaneously from the mystical and romantic song of Blake (1757-1827) whose singular poetic instinct and strongly marked individuality owed little to development or experience or the accepted models of his time; whilst Cowper, a poet of richer and more varied humanity, had not yet been acknowledged, in spite of his genuine and eminently characteristic outbursts of moral sensitiveness, as a worthy successor of Pope on the long-vacant throne of England.

The last quarter of the eighteenth century was, in short, an epoch at which nothing of any great value was being produced in poetry. Cowper and Blake are the chief, if not the only, exceptions that prove the rule. Theirs were the hands which had taken up the old heritage of English poetry—in the one case, the mantle of Milton, if not his secular and spiritual power; in the other case, the singing-garments of Herrick, if not the sensual fire of the flaming heart of the garrulous Cavalier lyrist who altogether lacks the stainless delicacy of soul, the fresh unconscious childlike beauty of Blake's simple nature that remained free to the end from the taint of the world and the dull foulness of physical passion. The average poetical level of the time out of which Burns suddenly emerged to charm the ear of the whole world, was

represented by diffuse and feeble writers like Warton and Darwin. Even these, and such as these, showed a more or less vague aspiration towards the imaginative study of nature. But no human being who has any faculty of criticism can say much good of them. The day of small men and small achievements had set in within the domain of English poetry. And at home the darkness was most solid just before the dawn. Without in the least ignoring or undervaluing the faint glow of the coming naturalism to be noted in the productions of such singers as Mickle (1734-1788), and Logan (1748-1788), Alexander Ross (1699-1784), Michael Bruce (1746-1767), and James Beattie (1735-1803), — to mention but a few of those who, drawn to rural and pastoral scenery, led up from Ramsay to Fergusson and Burns,—it may be said that in order to find a Scottish poet of that high rank to which, by the generous criticism of Mackenzie, Burns was immediately raised, it would have been necessary to go back at least three centuries in our literary history.

The example set by the learned and ornate poets of the Transition Period,—from the union of the Crowns, that is, to Allan Ramsay (1603-1725),—had done much to favour the notion that the motto *Ridendo castigat mores* should be banished from poetry. Men of genius, yielding to the fashion of the time, either wrote a grave pure English style,

like Aytoun and Drummond and Stirling, or, disdain-  
ing to cultivate the polished dialect of the old  
Anglo-Saxon which had become the language of the  
Court after the accession of James VI. to the English  
throne, threw themselves into the arms of the Latin  
muses, as in the case of Arthur Johnston (1587-  
1641), Patrick Adamson (1543-1591), Lord Thirlestane  
(1537-1595), and others, who wrote, like Buchanan  
before them, for a posterity of scholars.\* Invention  
was thus crushed by imitation of the literatures  
of other and widely different races which were  
held up for emulative admiration to our students.  
And subsequently, the conventionality and unreality  
of the Popian era had so affected the native  
language and literary tendencies of Scotland that the  
vernacular was not only abandoned in large measure  
for English, as we have seen, but those who still  
cultivated the native muse with becoming loyalty  
and reverence were hampered in their efforts,—  
even after the death of Pope and Thomson,—by  
*ex cathedrâ* hack critics, like the literary forger John  
Pinkerton (1758-1825), who described the comic and  
satiric songs which they addressed to the masses  
as vulgar pothouse pleasantries or pieces of coarse  
buffoonery. Genius was thus repressed, or wasted,  
or wedded to obscurity. Men no longer wrote for

\* See the full list of contributors—thirty-seven in number—  
to the *Delitiæ Poetarum Scotorum* (1637) in Professor Masson's  
*Drummond of Hawthornden*, p. 250; also *Lives of Ancient Scottish  
Poets*, London, 1822. Part iii., p. 84.

the multitude without whose inspiring approbation national literature must inevitably languish and die. And shortly before the advent of Burns Scottish literature may be said to have represented therefore a side-stream of the classical current of the period. Ramsay himself, notwithstanding that it was he who, at the dawn of the eighteenth century, broke the scholastic spell and wooed the Muses in home-spun attire, is not quite free of the pedantic Philomel spirit of the time. There is a lingering touch of it too in the book-gotten epithets of the town-bred Fergusson. And something of the old conventional, feigning peculiar to the academical revivalists and imitators of a previous generation, crops up incidentally even in the simpler and more idiomatic verse of his nature-nursed successor who sang, however, himself says in the preface to his first volume, "the sentiments and manners he felt and saw in himself and his rustic compeers around him, in his and their native language." And to find a parallel, therefore, for the intensely realistic and fearlessly satirical vernacular poetry of Burns, which was so rapturously received by the peasantry as the genuine revelation of a lost and re-discovered world, that in Galloway, as Heron tells us, "even ploughboys and maid-servants would have gladly bestowed the wages they earned most hardly" if they might procure a copy of the Kilmarnock volume, one must needs go back to the time of such spirited and humorous

poems as *Christ's Kirk of the Grene* and *Peblis to the Play*—both ascribed by a preponderance of authority to James I.—in which the riotous merry-makings of the lower orders are picturesquely and impressively described, or the virile and fiery productions of our Scottish Chaucer, the easy, quick-witted, self-contained Dunbar, who in the age of James IV. delighted in personal ridicule and ludicrous conceptions of exalted things; and, though of stronger and harsher nerves than Burns, was, like him, sweet and graceful, extravagantly humorous, and gravely moral by turns.

## CHAPTER IV.

THE DAWN OF NATURALISM : FROM RAMSAY TO BURNS.

### I.

FROM the union of the Crowns to that of the Kingdoms, Scottish literature had continued in a state of miserable obscurity. Indeed it is impossible to find in the period between the great Humanist and Reformer, George Buchanan (1506-1582), the prince of Scottish Latinists and a poet moulded almost wholly by classical writers, and the great Pyrrhonist, David Hume (1711-1776), one of the most durably eminent critics of thought, any native author of the highest class. When Lyndsay, the last truly great national poet of the Stuart period, died in 1557, in the midst of the throes of the Reformation struggle which the superabundant energy and trenchant sense of his "raggit rural verse" had helped to forward, the vernacular literature of Scotland generally showed a decided tendency to languish. And although Scottish poetry was still kept alive by such distinctively national writers as Montgomerie, Alexander Scott, Alexander Hume, and others, who sang between 1535 and 1603, the primitive intensity and creative enthusiasm of the native genius appeared to have been



exhausted or diverted into other channels by the whirlwind of iconoclastic passion that swept over the land in 1560. In the Reformation period itself, in the period which intervened between the union of the Crowns in 1603 and the Revolution of 1688, and, finally, in the short but agitated period between that event and the union of the Parliaments in 1707, all the higher fields of literature were singularly barren. Men found in these epochs of quickened activity an outlet for their pent-up forces in theological controversy, in political conflict, in social distractions. For a time the deep spring seemed to have dried up from whence poetic streams had formerly flowed, with a natural sequence and an instinctive regularity, to fertilise the national mind and vivify the thought of future ages.

With the passing away of Montgomerie and his immediate successors who had appealed to the sympathies of their countrymen in lofty Scottish strains, the native poetry of the northern kingdom sank into a species of theological bondage. Romantic fancy and imaginative fervour seemed no longer compatible with spiritual disengagement from absorbing cares and a powerful grasp on the realities of life. The freedom, spirit, and power of the earlier verse, unrivalled in its elasticity and ease and daring, were checked or destroyed during the latter half of the sixteenth century. It was essentially an epoch of decadence, of laboured imitation, of artistic incompleteness, in which the poet fitfully and,

for the most part, feebly, interpreted the striving impulses of the time. And the union of the Crowns tended still further to repress the native spirit and cripple the power of the native tongue. With the departure of the Court from Holyrood, and the removal of the principal Lairds and Lords to attend the king in London, Scotsmen of talent, who seemed to know no Apollo but Horace or Catullus, ceased to write in their native language which had become unacceptable to the ear of their pedantic prince. If they did not always write for the Court in Latin, which James affected to speak and write with great purity, as Melville and Pollock and Wedderburn had done, they at least disdained the task of writing for the mere people, and would compose no more in the common language of the peasantry. Aytoun, Stirling, and Drummond, whose works are all that Scotland has to sustain its poetical reputation during the long and gloomy, yet classic, period which elapsed between *The Cherrie and the Slae* of Montgomerie and *The Gentle Shepherd* of Ramsay, are, as we have already seen, representative examples of the distinct decadence and even abandonment of the native language by Scottish writers of note between 1603 and 1649. Numerous ballad-makers cultivated, no doubt, the native muse in the latter half of the seventeenth century. But a long twilight followed the splendid sunset of Drummond,

whose songs did sometime grace  
The murmuring Esk.

The muses of Scotland sank into silence then ; a silence

unbroken by any solitary song-bird of sovereign note for a period of eighty years. And with the Legislative Union and the consequent deepening of English influence on the language of the northern part of the kingdom, our last hopes of possessing a separate literature seemed to vanish. For in 1707 there were but slight indications of that passion for song-writing which suddenly seized upon all classes in Scotland,—from persons of high social distinction like Lady Anne Lindsay, eldest daughter of the Earl of Balcarres, who wrote the sincere and thrilling song of *Auld Robin Gray*, to deformed and dissolute cottagers like Tibbie Pagan, the “auld rudas” of an Ayrshire alehouse, and the reputed authoress of the original verses of *Ca’ the Yowes to the Knowes*,—and at length brought about that epoch-making and distinctively national lyric movement of which Ramsay was the initiator and Burns the central figure. The opening years of the eighteenth century saw Scotland humbled in spirit, harassed by religious and political feuds, deprived of its national honours and virtually degraded into a mere province, as men openly said and sang from Belhaven to Burns;—a province, moreover, sadly rent and distracted by internal divisions and civil discords that eventually led to the unhappy insurrection of 1715, which seemed to extinguish finally and for ever the last flickering flame of intellectual ambition. For the numberless effusions which emanated from partisan-poets during this troublous period are really of small

account. The Jacobite versifiers who, exulting in the prospect of yet

gracing and placing  
Arright the Scottis throne,—

as Ramsay, himself an anti-Unionist with strong Jacobite proclivities, expressed it in his *Vision* of 1724,—owe their shadowy fame to a few dim notices of contemporary manners and customs that possess an antiquarian interest; and, strictly speaking, their contributions to the national literature form but a poor collection of fugitive lyrics from which it would be difficult to extract even half-a-dozen strains equal in point of poetic excellence to any average specimen of the old chivalrous ballad of the Southern or the Highland Border.

To prevent mistake, however, I may remark here that we have undoubtedly in such verse as the justly celebrated Jacobite ode of *Gladsmuir*, or *Whirry, Whigs, awa'*, or old Skirving's satiric ballad of *Hey Johnnie Cope*, genuine outleakings of the humour and fancy and fervour of feeling that were characteristic of the old Scots world; just as we have echoes of the simply humorous or sweetly mournful music of older pastoral ditties in *The Braes of Yarrow* and *Logie o' Buchan*, in *My daddie is a caukert carle* and *Married and Woo'd and a'*, in *The Bush aboon Traquair* and *Tullochgorum* (which Burns declared was "the best Scotch song Scotland

ever saw"), or *The Flowers of the Forest*—the immortal productions of Hamilton of Bangour (1704-1754), Halkett the Jacobite schoolmaster of Ratten (died 1756), Carnegie the laird of Balnamoon who was out in the forty-five (—? —?), Ross of Lochee a "stickit minister" turned dominie (1698-1784), Crawford of Auchinames, a cadet of the family of Drumsoy, (1695-1732), Skinner the persecuted parson-poet of Linshart (1711-1801), and Jean Elliott the third daughter of Sir Gilbert Elliott of Minto (1727-1805). These writers it is true kept alight in eighteenth-century Scotland the lamp of Doric song which had been handed down from the previous age by popular folk-poets like Maitland and Pennycuik, or Lord Yester, maker of the oldest and best set of words to the air of *Tweedside*, Semple of Beltrees (died circa 1683), reputed author of *Fy! let us a' to the bridal* and *Maggy Lauder*, and Hamilton of Gilbertfield who wrote *The Last Dying Words of Bonny Heck* which fired the muse of Allan Ramsay, who thus addresses the graceful elegist in a familiar epistle dated July 10th, 1719:—

When I begoud first to cun verse,  
 And cou'd your Ardry whins rehearse,  
 Where Bonny Heck ran fast and fierce,  
     It warm'd my breast;  
 Then emulation did me pierce,  
     Whilk since ne'er ceast.

But it must be remembered that the majority of the writers first named were in reality scholars of Ramsay,

as Ramsay himself was avowedly a pupil of the "blyth and gabby" bard of Gilbertfield; and that, although "the land was burning" at the period under notice, the art of native poetry was neither so seriously nor so successfully cultivated as it was when Burns came into the world, and by the might and masterdom of his genius won the prize for which ambitious men were then everywhere actively competing, in the north of Scotland as in the south. The revival of North British song dates no doubt from the first Rebellion of 1715. The adventurous exploits of the age, its passionate hopes, deep-rooted animosities, and fitful misgivings, supplied a unique stimulus in this direction. But it was not till the publication of Ramsay's collection of *Scots Songs* in 1719, and his own poems in 1721, which were quickly followed by *The Tea-Table Miscellany* and *The Evergreen* (1724) and *The Gentle Shepherd* (1725), that verse at all resembling, either in volume or quality, the old order of native songs which took root in darker ages and still survive, — for instance, the fossil songs that lie embedded in *The Gude and Godly Ballates* of James Wedderburn (1549), or the well-known lyric *Tak your auld Cloak about ye*, two verses of which are quoted, with striking variations by Iago in the play of *Othello*, first published in 1602, or that heart-broken strain, dateless and unclaimed, beginning "O, Waly, Waly, up the bank"—began to flourish north of the Tweed. When the Chevalier came to try a

desperate cast for the crown which his ancestors had lost, the nation, as already indicated, lay in a kind of stupor. Shorn of its strength and glory, it was unable or unwilling to strike from its ancient lyre strains of intense and spontaneous melody. Degraded to the condition of a mere province, as men thought, its literature consequently became excessively, and in the worst sense, provincial: it was petty in intent, ephemeral in interest, and, with the universal spirit of the nation humbled, Scottish song-writers gave up to party what was meant for mankind. And this state of matters is vividly recalled by the backward-glancing muse of Burns in his ultra-patriotic poem of *The Union* :—

Fareweel to a' our Scottish fame,  
 Fareweel our ancient glory !  
 Fareweel even to the Scottish name,  
 Sae fam'd in martial story !  
 Now Sark rins o'er the Solway sands,  
 And Tweed rins to the ocean,  
 To mark where England's province stands ;  
 Such a parcel of rogues in a nation.

What guile or force could not subdue,  
 Through many warlike ages,  
 Is wrought now by a coward few,  
 For hircling traitor's wages.  
 The English steel we could disdain,  
 Secure in valour's station,  
 But English gold has been our bane ;  
 Such a parcel of rogues in a nation.

O would, or had I seen the day  
 That treason thus could sell us,

My auld grey head had lien in clay,  
Wi' Bruce and loyal Wallace !  
But pith and power, till my last hour  
I'll mak this declaration,  
We're bought and sold for English gold ;  
Such a parcel of rogues in a nation !

## II.

At the commencement of the eighteenth century there were many things going on in Scotland which were certainly well calculated to put song-making out of men's heads. But the native genius of the people, though menaced by divers dangers, was so vigorous, the race itself was so full of a robust tempestuous vitality, and the language was so copious and so vivid in its spoken strength, that the primitive poetic impulse, though dormant for a time, was not likely either to die out utterly or remain long repressed. And on the other hand, it was manifest that neither political strife nor religious dissensions could quench in the heart of the people that deep-rooted passion for the native minstrelsy which had been temporarily restrained, however, by the steadily increasing classical innovations of English-writing poets in that epoch of efflorescent decadence which Drummond's genius had vitalised and dominated. When, therefore, the first Rebellion was once suppressed the whole conflict in which the nation had so ardently engaged reacted fruitfully on the genius of the race, quickening into life its latent



seeds of reflective knowledge, romantic fancy, and poetic art.\* The old Kingdom revived suddenly from her stupor; and, using again the old Doric pipe through which Dunbar had blown with pompous volubility his trumpet-blasts to battle, and Montgomerie had tenderly sounded the soft and subtle secrets of a lover's heart, once more asserted her name in far-resonant strains of sweet or sonorous music which England was compelled not only to hear, but to applaud through the generous criticism of Pope and Gay, of Swift and Steele. With liberty of action, liberty of mind began to appear. Under the conventional literature, imitated from England, a fresher and freer literature had been slowly, almost imperceptibly, dawning. When Drummond, for instance, wrote such lines as these:—

In petticoat of green,  
Her hair about her eyne,  
Phyllis beneath an oak  
Sat milking her fair flock :  
Among that strained moisture, rare delight !  
Her hand seemed milk in milk, it was so white.—

he gave a dim intimation of the pure pastoralism that was coming, a faint foreshadowing of the characters, scenery, and background of *The Gentle Shepherd*. And amid so many barren endeavours of the vernacular poets—for, by this time, whilst ambition, it is true, was everywhere, in the north and in the south alike, it did not always “light upon faculty”—a rare opening

\* See Lockhart *Life of Burns*, p. 95.

was offered to a native writer who was either wise enough to revive and restore the art-products of a more picturesque past, or strong enough to shatter the classic models which were still in vogue, and create a poetic world of homelier humanity vivid with the spirit of the modern age. What has been described as "the genius of youthfulness" was as truly dominant in the eighteenth century as it had been in Dunbar's day. Renascent, not new-born, it was fostered by the intellectual conditions of the time which, though adverse perhaps to the highest perfection of art, were yet helpful to its freedom and expansion. For, viewed from the standpoint of the present, it was essentially an era of promise, expectation, and advancement. And all that was wanted was a writer of distinct individuality who could lift the broad and pithy Lowland Scotch away from everything that was harsh, affected, or obscure, and make it again a Doric dialect of fame. That complete unity of national sentiment and action, which eventually became the great characteristic of the period, needed an interpreter; one who could assimilate in specific forms of native art the congenial elements of pre-Union poetry, and at the same time incarnate and express the dominant impulses and leading events of the modern era.

In the fulness of time such a poet emerged into the light of publicity. Scotland, half-mute since the

Union, at last found a voice in Allan Ramsay from whom came genuine outpourings of the old spirit; full of verve and manly strength of heart and intellect. The life of this genial mirth-loving poet fell within a period which was exceptionally full of dramatic change. He lived through the great events of the Revolution of 1688; and in his youth many were alive who had witnessed and felt the effects of Cromwell's usurpation and Monk's administration in Scotland and rejoiced at the restoration of Charles II. to his crown and kingdoms. He passed through the protracted agitation that preceded the Legislative Union of 1707; and witnessed the baffled Revolutions associated with the Jacobite risings under both the Old and the Young Pretender. For he was born (1686) at the moorland village of Leadhills (which he describes with picturesque minuteness in his *Petition to the Whin-Bush Club*) in the reign of James II.; and died at Edinburgh (1758) when that of George II. was swiftly drawing to a close; his long career thus terminating just before the brief life of Burns began. It was, as every one knows, at the "lamp of honest Allan," who judiciously adopted and told with artless propriety in his verse the romantic stories connected with the national incidents noted above, that the Ayrshire Bard first kindled his "brilliant torch." This of itself would do much to memorise the Gentle Shepherd's song. But Ramsay has other and more personal claims on our interest

and regard. The zeal and success with which he re-established the Doric vogue and brought back real pastoral poetry to Scottish literature will always distinguish one of the brightest pages of our literary history. He was avowedly a poetical disciple of Hamilton of Gilbertfield, of whom we get a delightful glimpse in the self-delineating song of *Willie was a wanton wag*. His muse was stirred into emulative vigour by the less celebrated productions of a contemporary singer. Yet it is in his verse, produced between 1719 and 1725, that we discern the first signs in Scottish literature of the coming revival of nationality which, commencing among the common people for whom it was primarily intended, soon served to correct the false classicism that had marked the previous age. With Ramsay who was in a sense the Scottish Tottle of eighteenth-century literature, the more direct and effective forms of poetry came again into favour. He collected and adapted those pastoral lays and love-lilts of ruder ages that had lingered in the tenacious memory of the Lowland peasantry; and rescued from the comparative obscurity of that precious Manuscript written by George Bannantyne in 1568, and deposited in the Advocates' Library in 1772, much of the best poetry of Dunbar who, though recognised by his contemporary Douglas, and his successor Lyndsay, as the master of the Scottish makers, had been almost forgotten for nearly two centuries,\* and many of those

\* See Mackay Introduction to *The Poems of Dunbar*, Small's ed. 1889 (Scottish Text Society) Part iii. p. xiii.

folk songs and true ballads—of which *Johnnie Armstrong*, first printed in *The Evergreen*, is an illustrious example—which reveal in fine flashes of pathos and passion the intensely vivid life of the feudalised past. In this way he fostered and deepened the returning interest in those oral lyrics of great antiquity and beauty which politics and pedantry had temporarily discredited or dismissed from mind. And by his original contributions, in which he held the mirror up to the more idyllic aspects of rural existence, he redeemed the Scottish poetry of that age from the charge of utter sterility; whilst their broad fun, sly satire, and humorous descriptions of local life revived in the hearts of his countrymen a thousand half-forgotten sympathies. His own work, in spite of numerous imperfections, made possible the pastoral and lyrical tenderness of the next half-century. And his famous Collections of ancient Scottish poetry, in spite of bad editing,—for his unskilful use of the language and his unwarrantable liberties with the text are notorious—revived the public interest in those older national pieces which fixed the bent of his own genius when he became acquainted with them through Watson's publication, already mentioned, after his arrival in Edinburgh in 1701.

### III.

At this turning-point of English literature Ramsay then may be said to have been by far the most influential

and important literary figure in Scotland. It was he who first brought back true Scottish character into a kind of portrait-gallery after the lapse of well-nigh a hundred years; and gave an impulse to that poetry of external nature which was destined to alienate the general heart of Britain—for Thomson and Dyer soon followed his lead—from the poetry, formed on classical models, which had dominated the previous age. At the very outset Ramsay rejected the tame formalism of his predecessors, and all rules of art distilled from foreign and scholar-disciplined tradition. He set aside those academic conventionalities through which poetical observation of nature had ceased to be just; and, respecting the personal impression, adhered closely to the life before his eyes. No poet of his time indeed had an influence which so made for truth pure and simple. His images were native and domestic: his landscapes were copied from the hills and fields and meadows that he every day beheld. Escaping almost entirely from the “genteel style,”—from the notion that mean and trivial things are necessarily beneath the dignity of art—this native genius was content with appealing directly to the peasantry, and fought shy of those who, under the oppressive weight of pedantic humanism, had attempted the revival of classic forms from the time of the *Delitiae Poetarum Scotorum*. He not only ignored but ridiculed the servile imitations of post-Union poets; and showed by his signal success in the revived use of the vernacular how unwisely it had been abandoned by them. Whilst

Pope, influenced by foreign models and gathering delicate blossoms of exotic growth from sweet and tender tales of a spurious Arcadia, was putting forth the sham-pastorals of his nonage, Ramsay, a child of nature's own, was planning, in no trim Armida's garden, but on the sunny slopes of the green and airy Pentlands, a real and perfect pastoral that would not only eclipse Pope's best efforts in this direction, but put in the shade the resplendent natural beauties of Tasso's *Aminta* or the *Pastor Fido* of Guarini.

I am very far from saying that Ramsay's poetry is entirely free from the mannerisms of the previous age, or even of contemporary art. In many passages there are distinct traces of artificiality of sentiment. The beauty of many of his Doric poems is impaired by the meaningless employment of those vapid classicalities which infected both the written and spoken language of the time. Though he was familiarly acquainted with rural nature from actual observation his muse is still sensibly influenced by that legacy of affectation which came down to us from the middle period of Scottish poetry, so that he continually introduces the sun and moon, the stars and seasons and winds, under their classical names—Phœbus, Cynthia, Ver, Boreas, Eolus, and so on. Even *The Gentle Shepherd*—probably the most perfect pastoral drama in the world—is marked by this hackneyed and insipid traditionalism. And in several places we find besides make-believes and conceits and pieces of pure

word-play in the stereotyped manner of the reigning Augustans. In proof of this I refer the reader to Act I., sc. 1, ll. 15-18; Act. I., sc. 2, ll. 185-191; Act III., sc. 3, ll. 41-46. These commonplace passages will at once recall to the mind of the student those tame imitations of the pastoral language of Virgil and Theocritus which occur in almost every line of Pope's eclogues. Nor must it be forgotten that in other matters the simple realism of *The Gentle Shepherd* is somewhat prejudicially affected by the poet's surface adoption of the taste of that polite and polished world of which Pope was the laureate, and with which Ramsay's home-bred verse had really little natural affinity. Although this piece has more of the true and homely sense of life in it than any previous effort of a similar kind, it is obvious that its author was not yet so completely emancipated from the literary influences of his time as to venture on the creation of a humble peasant-character for his hero, who was not to turn out well-born before the curtain was rung down. In other words, the spirited and cheerful Patie is a "gentle" shepherd; by which is meant that just as the sisterly-cousins Rosalind and Celia whilst masquerading, the one in man's apparel and the other in the garb of a shepherdess, down the mossy vistas and the green arcades of bending birchen boughs in Arden Forest, are in reality princes' daughters, so he is a shepherd *in appearance*, but in reality the son of a Sir William Worthy who, having fought for royalty under



Montrose, was stripped of his estates at the time of Cromwell's usurpation, and, forced into exile, left his child in charge of a humble but attached dependent till better days dawned with the Restoration of Charles II. And as of Patie, so of Peggy who "wears the Aurora gown," and passes before us lovely as "a light of laughing flowers." She is *thought* to be Glaud's niece. But when the *denouement* is brought about she proves to have been born a lady: the bonny foundling left "ae clear morn of May, close by the lee-side" of the faithful shepherd's door, is in reality of gentle blood and endowed with every quality that can adorn the character of woman. Ramsay, then, observes truly, and feels keenly; but he does not always keep his feeling fresh and unspoiled by his knowledge of books and of affairs. And it was hardly to be expected that he should. No writer in the full tide of literary fashion, as he was from 1722 till his death, could afford entirely to neglect the "thin diet of dainty words," or the artifices and make-believes of the conventional poets who had ruled the public mind so long. In a sense he had to follow them ere he could supplant them. And there was yet another and more material reason for his casual borrowings from the classical school and his surface adoption of the taste of the hour. These lines from his *Hudibrastic Epistle to James Arbuckle* of 1719:—

Contented I have sic a skair,  
As does my business to a hair;  
And fain wad prove to ilka Scot,  
That poortith's no the poet's lot—

are full of significance. Unlike Burns, who won the muse by natural affinity rather than overmastered her by intellectual force or finesse, and who gave away the manuscript of *The Jolly Beggars* shortly after its composition and forgot all about it, whilst, in pure love of art for art's sake only, he freely disposed of his lyrics to Thomson without any thought of recompense, Ramsay, who lavished his praises with systematic discrimination and thought not only of what would please but what would pay, made his very poetry a matter of business, and was essentially a writer the inspirations of whose muse were largely guided and controlled by the worldly wisdom of the well-worn axiom that "those who live to please, must please to live." In a word, he was too sympathetic or not strong enough to resist at first the current of contemporary taste which was still running swiftly towards conceit and make-believe.

But this point must not be too harshly insisted on. Such compliance with literary fashion indicates no doubt a certain failure of native force. But after all the defects noted are merely episodic. Grant that for a time he showed a disposition to hunt after personal conceits, like the Idealist-Impressionists of the seventeenth century, and to over-elaborate personal sensation by artifice, like the sentimental Augustans. His heart remained always open to the inspirations of nature in spite of such extravagance and verbose eccentricity; and his surface adoption of the taste

and manner of contemporary English writers did not prevent him from successfully wooing the native muses. The familiar ways of Scottish verse reclaimed their master. He gradually led art back to nature,—to what was sound and homely ; and in the Popian era of polite pretence itself, he placed the Scottish School of Romance on the sound basis of vernacular truth. The greatness of his gift, therefore, is not to be doubted. A prophet after his fashion, he is yet a man of earth, with no special celestial meaning in him. His mission, that is, is not spiritual. And although he feels the complex reality of human life exceedingly, his philosophy, if he has any, is not recondite. But as nature is simple, plain, and true, so is his poetry. Piercing below the surface to the heart that throbs within each image of his fancy it converts all it touches to essential realism. Nature, the divine schoolmistress, instructs him in rules of living art during casual excursions to Fairliehope and New Hall, to the Hunter's Tryste and the Hermitage of Braid ; and, reviving all the impressions of his early years spent in that high, isolated, and romantic region rich in native song and music, which lies within the fold of the green Lowthers, enables him to grasp all shapes through which he can express his knowledge of himself and of the breathing world around him. Ramsay gives us the domestic for the mythological which still found favour in his day : the universally true of human emotion

for the narrow namby-pamby sentimentalism that still endured. The great elementary passions of humanity throb musically in his home-bred verse which is poignant with heartfelt emotion if it be not pregnant with deep thought. The distinctive sense of landscape is never absent from it. His drawing is in the foreground and there is no chiaroscuro in his pages any more than there is in those of Burns. But how keen is the poet's eye for colour, for effective detail! How sensitive too his perception of emotional gradations and those abrupt distinctions which mark the ever-changing moods and separate the infinitely varied characters of men!

## IV.

RAMSAY is not a poet who appears to advantage in short quotations. But one or two passages may be given here, in illustration of his varied powers. As examples of imaginative vigour and brilliancy take these lines from *The Gentle Shepherd* :—

Sun, gallop down the westlin skies,  
 Gang soon to bed and quickly rise ;  
 O, lash your steeds, post time away,  
 An' haste about our bridal day !  
 An' if ye're wearied, honest light,  
*Sleep gin ye like a week that night.*

Or these from the dramatic dialogue called *The Tale of the Three Bonnets* :—

Now Sol wi' his lang whip gae cracks  
 Upon his niching cooser's backs,  
 To gar them tak th' Olympian brae  
*Wi' a cart load o' bleezing day!*

The pictorial charm of these impassioned invocations cannot be disputed. They are pieces of daring fancy, of intense and concentrated colour that recall the blunt realism of Dunbar and anticipate Burns's intensity and truth of picturesque epithet. And as regards true sentiment, loving delicacy, and refined passion, no poet who either preceded or followed Ramsay has surpassed this exquisite song which Peggy sings in the pastoral comedy as she takes leave of her lover :—

At setting day and rising morn  
 Wi' saul that still shall love thee,  
 I'll ask o' Heaven thy safe return,  
 Wi' a' that can improve thee.  
 I'll visit aft the birkin bush,  
 Where first thou kindly tauld me  
 Sweet tales of love, *and hid my blush,*  
*Whilst round thou didst infald me.*

To a' our haunts I will repair,  
 To greenwood, shaw, or fountain ;  
 Or where the summer day I'd share  
 Wi' thee upon yon mountain.  
 There will I tell the trees or flowers  
 Frae thoughts unfeigned and tender,  
*By vows* you're mine, *by love* is yours  
 A heart that cannot wander.

Mark the loving delicacy of the distinction in the

closing lines. Could the tear-provoking simplicity of womanly trust, or the unexacting tenderness of womanly passion, be more condensed than in these monosyllables? We have in this song the high-water mark of Ramsay's lyrical genius. Its passion is simple and homefelt. Its tenderness is human and womanly. For typical examples of that unconventional nature-painting which Ramsay resumed and glorified I must simply refer the reader to three passages—too long to quote—in *The Gentle Shepherd*. These are (1) the beginning of Scene ii., Act i.—an out-door picture which, whilst showing marks of careful elaboration, has no trace of stiffness or pedantry or false Arcadianism; (2) the beginning of Scene ii., Act v.—an in-door picture of rural life which reminds one of the touches of minute fidelity in Homer; and (3) the beautiful dialogue between Peggy and Jenny in Act i., Scene ii.—a graphic and humorous description of the distresses incident to married life, which has something in it of Dunbar's peculiar terseness and vigour, and something also of the romantic glow and extraordinary romantic simplicity of Burns's best delineations. And, lastly, as an example of that love of one's place of birth and thence of country which forms so potent an element in the passionate appeals of the new poetry to the spirit of national independence and domestic piety, take these lines from the one serious lyric of Ramsay that has kept possession of the popular heart and mind:—

Farewell to Lochaber, farewell to my Jean,  
Where heartsome wi' thee I ha'e mony a day been ;  
To Lochaber no more, to Lochaber no more,  
We'll maybe return to Lochaber no more.

Even with such examples in view, Ramsay's actual achievement may be judged imperfect and unequal, immature and limited. His note, to modern thinking, may even seem monotonous. But in his own line and within his own limits he remains inimitable. No competent criticism of any school has ever denied his claim at least to a high and even sovereign station among poets of the second order. If the question had ever been seriously debated after Pinkerton's splenetic outburst of 1786, his immense popularity which has outlasted all changes of manners and fashions, would at once settle it. No one who reads poetry can fail to admit the charm of *The Vision*. No spread of culture, no pressure of fashion, will ever prevent such a lyric as *Lochaber no more* from attracting admiration as soon as it is read or heard. Its rugged passion and rude pathos appeal to every heart in every age. And nothing has availed, or ever will avail so long as human nature remains true to itself, to shake the hold of *The Gentle Shepherd* on the popular mind. In his treatment of external nature, there are certainly limits beyond which Ramsay cannot go—the limits of his age, however, which was more easily satisfied than ours. But in his sympathy with human action and human feeling he does not show the same narrowness.

On the contrary he possesses that realistic gift which can grasp at will almost any phase of character or incident. The truth of this is amply attested by his *Fables*, in which the *naïveté* of La Fontaine is combined with the easy wit of his contemporary Gay, and by his *Tales*, the best of which display on the one hand the forcible realism and life-like humour of Chaucer, and on the other, the descriptive sprightliness and passionate effusion of Boccaccio. Here his essentially dramatic genius finds its fullest scope. He is pre-eminently the painter of rural manners and customs, the genial satirist of local fashions and local characters. But we find in his provincial sketches the passions and manners of humanity everywhere, and in his pastoral types the complexity of all human attributes. Who can deny the charm of his homely picturings—Mause's meadow with its spring-wells and blasted solitary tree, Glaud's onstead and "the craigy bield" by Symon's house, and Habbie's Howe "where a' the sweets o' spring an' simmer grow?" Or the simple fidelity and thoroughness of his limnings of contemporary Scots, which bring before us, as it were, our forefathers and great-grandames who look out upon us with speechful glances from his canvas,—warm breathing realities vivid with the spirit of the age? His touch is firm; his handling is varied; his range, all things considered, is remarkably wide. And to pass from the framework of other contemporary products to Ramsay's group of pastoral characters, is to pass from convention to reality. In the matter of



word-painting—in the delineation of human character and the satirical expression of contemporary manners and customs—he is the Hogarth of eighteenth-century art. No one who reads his elegies on *Maggie Johnstone* and *Lucky Wood* can fail to recognise this.

## V.

WRITING to Lockhart forty years after his chance meeting with Burns, Scott says that “having twenty times the abilities of Ramsay and of Fergusson, he talked of them with too much humility as his models.” And then he shrewdly adds, “There was, doubtless, national predilection in his estimate.” Now this is, in large measure, unassailably true. Nationality may be defined as the paramount bias of Burns’s poetic genius and also of his critical judgment. But has not this same prejudice coloured all subsequent estimates, and prevented to some extent the formation of a just and well-balanced opinion concerning Ramsay’s real faculty and ultimate function? Certain critics,—referring specially, of course, if not entirely, to his successful attempt to naturalize pastoral poetry—have set Ramsay beside his great successor Burns, and indeed above him. I cannot do this. Ramsay had many excellent qualities—harmony, facility of expression, truth to nature, truth to art, freedom from convention within his range. But in all these he was excelled by Burns as Perugino was excelled by Raphael, as Marlowe

was excelled by Shakespeare. To me it seems that the primary gift of Ramsay no less than the spirit in which he exercised it, the detail and the sum of his achievement no less than the effect produced by it in the future, were all inferior to those of Burns. We must now carefully discriminate, therefore, between what was really great in Ramsay, and what was merely tentative in the direction of final greatness ; and not so confuse endowments as to pay to him the homage which is due to Burns alone who, whilst indubitably the inheritor and perpetuator of those traditions which Ramsay re-established, was yet, in the truest sense, a poet of a higher and a radically different order.

It is perhaps uncritical to say that the modern mind as represented by Ramsay started from imitation. For it manifestly initiated, and in Burns completed, a new process of its own. And yet a good deal might be said in favour of this theory. Ramsay's joy in other men's poetry, his wish to reproduce it for the delectation and enlightenment of the grovelling masses of Scotland, —for that seems to have been the great primary project that dwelt in his mind from the very outset—continually gave way to the fatally ambitious desire to render it more beautiful and more true: And naturally enough as much evil as good resulted from the labours of a man of facile talent and poetic temperament but limited experience and slight editorial capacity. The bent of his genius was fixed and his poetical growth determined, it is true, by

the study of those older national pieces which he reproduced in *The Evergreen*, and which eventually gave birth by their inspiration and suggestiveness to *The Gentle Shepherd*. But the treatment to which he and his "ingenious young gentlemen" who collaborated with him in the publication of the *Miscellany* subjected those characteristic songs which had floated among the people for centuries—such, for instance, as the old airs *O'er the mure to Maggie* and *The Colleyr's Daughter*, to which Ramsay's perverse conceit induced him to write new words—simply resulted in sweeping for ever from our grasp scores of those genuine effusions which had made the native minstrels of the "north countrie" so celebrated in past times.\* Inasmuch therefore as he revived the interest of his countrymen in the popular poetry of the past, Ramsay deserves our gratitude. Like Watson, he was in this regard our Scottish Tottel. His *Miscellany* marked an epoch in the literature of the north. A collection of poems and songs by ancient and modern writers, it was a fit spring prelude to that great summer season of sunshine and music which came with Burns, whose sustained rich note rose high and clear above the pleasant carolling of smaller song-birds. It was, in short, a hopeful thing for those days, and for all future days, that the enthusiasm of poetry seized upon "honest Allan." For his two miscellanies

\* See Scott *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* i. p. 406.

prepared the Scottish ear for Burns.\* Nevertheless, as an editor he was notoriously tasteless, tactless, and unfaithful. Wherefore with equal justice he may be called the blundering Bowdler of his time. In respect of at least ninety of the old native strains which he then found floating on the memories of the people it may be said that he attempted to give a new freshness and individuality to them by modernizing the versification and varying the ancient orthography. In his Preface he made it his boast indeed that wherever practicable he had given *new* words to every *old* air he had come across. Whether we regard him then as a compiler "of Scots poems wrote by the ingenious before 1600," or as an imitator and continuator of medieval poets like James I., Henryson, and Dunbar, or as a recoter of the lyrics which were popular at the time of the Revolution,—after which era of decadence scarcely any vestige of the remains of the old Lowland bards or minstrels can be traced,—it is characteristic of Ramsay that he so uses and works up all accessible models and materials as thoroughly to subordinate them to his own personal purposes. And hence if we except *The Vision* (which shows, however, numerous adaptations and borrowings), *The Gentle Shepherd* (which also bears obvious traces of suggested thought), and the best of the *Fables and Tales* (which have a tincture of Chaucer and Dunbar), Ramsay's poetry as a whole may fitly

\* See Gosse *History of Eighteenth-Century Literature*, p. 139.

enough be described as a kind of silver-age revival of antique Scottish art. What was produced at least by Ramsay himself—always excepting poems like those just named—and by the lakadaisical poets associated with him—what we now call 'Ramsay's group'—was of little real and abiding worth. In the *Miscellany* you will find here and there a natural line, a genuine verse even; but how many original poems that are well-minted and of full weight? How many have in them from top to bottom the ring of the true metal? As a whole their original poetry was essentially hollow and artificial—the result of studies in Restoration and Queen Anne literature. It had no fulness of national life in it, no common elements of ethical conviction or special political and social aspiration, to vitalise and ennoble it, like the work of Burns which was to follow—nothing, in a word, that by itself could give higher meaning and power to the evolution of Scottish poetry.

Ramsay, as I have already shown, has a true song note of his own. Several of his essays in song composition display a high quality of lyric power. In point of pastoral simplicity *The Lass of Patie's Mill*, and *The Yellow-hair'd Laddie*, and *The Waukin' o' the Faulds*, or the *Farewell to Lochaber*, and *Bessy Bell and Mary Gray*, are equal to most lyric productions in any language.\* But with these excep-

\* See Ritson *Historical Essay on Scottish Song* p. lxiii.

tions his songs are seldom above mediocrity. As a rule—and this applies even to the intercalated songs of *The Gentle Shepherd*, of which not more than three (including Peggy's song quoted on a previous page) are of special merit—they want that soul-stirring energy of impatient captivating sweetness, that spontaneous unaffected ardour with its impulsive tone of invitation which will brook no denial, that simple-thoughted emotion pithily presented which you never fail to discover in all amatorious verse which has continued universally popular from Catullus to Burns whose lyric touch is direct and fresh and incomparably finer. And although, as Professor Veitch has pointed out, Ramsay “emphasised, though he did not introduce into our Scottish love-songs, the courtship in the open air, with all its tender associations of natural scenery,” he is too often merely sentimental and affected, whilst the humour which seems inevitable in the popular versified records of rustic wooing is sometimes forced and factitious. No competent critic would ever think of comparing his songs with many of those composed by contemporaries and countrymen less known to fame;—by Crawford, for instance, and Hamilton of Bangour, and Lord Binning, to mention but three. These are not prolific poets; but they sound a much higher lyric note than his. Where can one find in Ramsay anything that will surpass in persuasive power and delicate beauty such tender lyrics of single-hearted sincerity as *What beauties does Flora disclose*, and *The Braes of Yarrow*,

and *Did ever swain a nymph adore?* When we wish, in short, to find what is at once Ramsay's happiest and most complete utterance, we must look elsewhere than to his lyrics whose note, whilst containing an anticipatory vibration of the burst of song that was to follow, has really nothing of the note of passion and of truth that rings in almost every line of Burns's verse. And need I say that we find this supreme utterance in *The Gentle Shepherd* which Burns himself described as "the most glorious poem that ever was written?" That is the man's highest point as an artist; the noblest and most permanent monument of his fame. Its great charm lies in the skilfully balanced antitheses of its contrasts—what Hogg in the *Noctes Ambrosianæ*, with a side-remark of facetious disparagement, calls "a muckle see-sawing between twa individual hizzies"—in the reflected interest, in other words, which each representative type,—ideal, yet sketched from the life, and as distinct as a drawing by Hogarth,—casts on its opposite. And its homely earnestness and ready humour, its beauty and fidelity as a living picture of Scottish rural life and character, were instantly recognised not only by the peasantry of the eighteenth century whose delight and solace it was, as it still is to their descendants, the lads and lassies of the Lowlands to whom its pithy couplets appeal with all the force of proverbs, but by English contemporaries of culture like Pope and Gay whose methods and mode of life were so utterly at variance

with Ramsay's own. The influence exerted by this pastoral on the growth of Scottish peasant poetry can scarcely be over-estimated ; and you will search in vain through the body of his verse for such another proof of merit and accomplishment.

## VI.

AFTER all that can be said then by way of qualification, Ramsay must be regarded as the most influential literary personage in Scotland in the first half of the eighteenth century ; the first original product of the Scottish Renaissance. When we reflect on the condition of Scottish poetry before his advent and consider the state in which he left it, we shall be able to estimate his true right to the name of pioneer and maker. Before he began to write there was, no doubt, plenty of productive energy, plenty of enthusiasm and activity. But this enthusiasm was misdirected, this activity was still in a sense chaotic. The native muse had been wasting her strength in a dead language ; and it was at least difficult to discern in the classical productions of English-writing poets like Drummond the true and living germs of that great national art whose growth, strange to say, had not been set beyond all risk of accident even by the puissant genius of Dunbar. Fully aware of his object, Ramsay saved the Scottish tongue from the peril that had threatened it. After the lapse of nearly a century he brought into general notice



the ancient poetry of the land, restored the Scottish Muse to her native garb; and, as the true prototype and forerunner of Burns, produced the thing which was to be so great, and is still so perfect.

There are many reasons why we should venerate the name of Ramsay. He was our first glossarist. He was also one of the earliest, albeit one of the least skilful, compilers of our Poetical Miscellanies. And, if Henryson was the author of the *first* pastoral in the language—*Robene and Makyne*—Ramsay, the creator of *The Gentle Shepherd*, was the author of *the last and the best*. In thus restoring the Doric, reviving the ancient poetic forms, and bringing back real pastoral poetry to literature, he gave a powerful impulse to the life and the art of the nation. His genuine national enthusiasm strengthened the loyal and patriotic sympathies of his countrymen. His genius, reacting powerfully on the spirit of the age, awakened the individual energies of other singers. In the one case he communicated to the peasantry that free, joyous, polemical spirit of the Restoration which was destined to battle with, and ultimately to destroy in Burns's day, the austere Puritanical spirit of the Scottish Kirk. In the other case he roused into emulative vigour the dormant native muse both in the north and south, and was the direct cause of that brilliant efflorescence of Scottish genius which marked the

period between 1725 and 1754. Ramsay had relied on the powers of his native tongue, and the success which attended his efforts had eventually the effect of bringing back from "southern gnaps" to their own "country leed" \* all those who made poetic fame the object of their ambition. The disposition prevailing before his advent, and to which there was a return after his death, to adopt English to the neglect of native literature, is thus referred to in Beattie's *Epistle to Alexander Ross*, the poet-schoolmaster of Lochlee, whose own productions have long disputed popularity amongst the simple and pious natives of the romantic valley of the North Esk with the sublime allegory of Bunyan and the heart-thrilling songs of Burns :—

Since Allan's death, nae body car'd  
 For anes to speer how Scots far'd ;  
 Nor plack nor thristled turner war'd †  
                                   To quench her drouth ;  
 For, frae the cottar to the laird,  
                                   We a' run south.

\* *Gnaps*, or *Knaps* ; clipped English. "James the Fyft . . . hereing ane of his subjects Knap Suddrone, declarit him ane trateur." —*Questionis to the Ministeris. Leed*, or *Lied*, or *Lede* ; language :— "But it suld be all trew Scottis mennis lede."—*Dunbar Flying of Dunbar and Kennedie*, l. 346.

† *Plack* : a copper coin, value four pence Scotch=one-third of a penny English. *Turner*, or "bodle : " a copper coin, value two pennies Scotch—from the French *Tournois*, where the copper money was coined. *Thristled* : stamped with the national emblem of the thistle, to distinguish from the French coin which circulated in Scotland even so late as the reign of Louis XIV.

The Southland chieils indeed hae mettle,  
 And brawly at a sang can ettle ;  
 Yet we right couthily might settle  
                   On this side Forth.  
 The devil pay them with a pettle,  
                   That slight the north.

Our country leed is far frae barren,  
 'Tis even right pithy and auld farran,  
 Oursells are neiper-like, I warran,  
                   For sense and smergh ; [smartness]  
 In kittle times, when faes are yarrin',  
                   We're no thought ergh. [timid]

What next calls for special notice is the fact that but for Ramsay our literature in all probability would not have been enriched with the Poetical Miscellanies of Percy (1765) and Herd (1769) and Pinkerton (1786) ; or with Johnson's extensive collection of songs (1787), and the greater work of Thomson (1793). The last two owe their celebrity to the beautiful songs contributed by Burns. But the taste which they were meant to satisfy was first created by Ramsay. Do we not even owe to him the greatest and most significant collection of all—*The Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (1802) by Walter Scott? It is pretty certain, at least, that but for Ramsay's inspiring influence Ross's *Helenore* would never have been. This elaborate story of homely Scottish life, written in heroic measure and with Chaucerian simplicity, was actually composed some time prior to 1740 and in direct rivalry with Ramsay. And it is equally

certain that to his example and encouragement we owe the remarkable lyrics produced by that long line of poets, extending from Hamilton and Mallet to Fergusson and Skinner, who devoted themselves to the illustration of rural life and the description of pastoral scenery. They are all scholars of Ramsay, and their works continually bring into prominence minor qualities and aspects of his genius. Even Fergusson and Burns, whilst preserving their individual characteristics, shaped their verse upon his models much more than upon any previous productions of the Scottish imagination. Indeed the epoch was so penetrated and possessed by his spirit that he may with propriety be compared to a kind of central orb of a solar system round whom gathered a culminant and crowning constellation of brightness and beauty—mild-shining satellites like Mallet and Meston and Mickle; starry trinities like Crawford and Hamilton and Ross, or Skinner and Smollett and Logan, who sent forth lovely gleams of lyric light through their own special tract of heaven; and planets of the magnitude and intensity of Fergusson and Burns, the supreme outcome of the century's passion for song-writing, who, under the still dominant spell of his genius, rose in the next generation from the eastern and western horizon to charge the moral atmosphere men breathed with a finer and more vivifying element, and flood the heavens of modern poetry with a never-dying blaze

of radiance. Each of these writers ruled his own luminous house of fame ; and of Fergusson and of Burns it may indeed be said that in the native splendours of their spheres there was, independently of Ramsay, sufficient musical vibration and play of intellectual vivacity to feed the fire and charm the fancy of all hearts forever. This, of course, is especially true of Burns who dwells apart, an orbic bard of unassailable sovereignty. And yet, as "star to star vibrates light," so the vital and illuminating spirit of the pioneer-poet of the dawn of naturalism communicated itself to every succeeding writer of the new era. Every one of those who brightened the heaven of song in the second half of the eighteenth century—even Fergusson and Burns who were most able to "strike through a finer element of their own,"—borrowed much of their warmth and radiance from the genial poetry of *The Gentle Shepherd*. The whole manner of the epoch, in plainer speech, was saturated with Ramsay's style.

## VII.

AND yet, though other poets of merit flourished with Ramsay in the days of his pre-eminence, it is a singular fact that when he died in 1758 no bard could be found to sing a requiem over his grave. The first formal recognition of him as the great exemplar of all succeeding writers of Scottish verse is to be found

in the exordium of Ross's *Helenore* (1768) and the almost contemporaneous vernacular effusion of Beattie already quoted. This lack of enthusiasm has been attributed to apathetic ingratitude on the part of the nation. But the story of literature contains no record of popular ingratitude of this description. Reasons that harmonise more with probability may be assigned for it. One might, for instance, suggest that as loyalty to the House of Brunswick had been steadily growing after the utter collapse at Culloden of the Jacobite party of which Ramsay had been a stanch adherent, prudential reasons prevented his friends from publicly paying homage to the genius of one who, if not exactly the laureate of a defeated cause, had at least been the panegyrist of many of those who had most zealously supported it, whatever neutrality he might affect in political matters. Or, again, it might be said that the singular omission was due to the fact that men's minds were completely engaged by the ecclesiastical spirit of the time which had successively displayed its intolerance and bigotry in the persecution of the terrorist preacher Boston, the expulsion of Gillespie from the national church, the imprisonment of Episcopalian nonjurors, and the fierce opposition to dramatic representations, the newly-fostered appetite for which had been greatly stimulated by Ramsay's purse and pen, so that he was coarsely assailed by puritanical moralists in poetical pamphlets of which the lampoon, doubtfully attributed to Alexander Penne-

cuik, entitled *The Flight of Religious Piety from Scotland, upon account of Ramsay's lewd books*, is the most mark-worthy example. These religious schisms and public distractions are supposed, on tolerably good grounds, to have served as contributory causes of the too apparent relapse of our poetry at this time. But the real reason, it seems to me, was that Ramsay the popular poet had been long merged in the prosperous citizen who had gained a competence by his own exertions and sought to enjoy it in a simple, social, rational way in the lovely suburban retreat which he had built for himself on the north bank of the Castle Hill, whilst Scotland for the moment was destitute of a capable elegist to sing the praises of her great pastoral poet. And it is this last fact which calls for notice in passing.

Ramsay had ceased to write twenty-eight years before he died; the "whistle" of the *Gentle Shepherd* with its "pleasin' soun'" had long been silent; and, under the impulse given about this time towards an increased acquaintance with English literature, to which the establishment of his own and other circulating libraries in Scotland had mainly contributed, a new generation of writers had arisen in the interval, in whose hands imaginative literature was undergoing a complete transformation. The passion for English literature, first excited by the *Spectators* of Addison and the poetry of Pope, had been stimulated by the success of Thomson

(1700-1748) and Blair (1699-1746) who, whilst poets of Scottish birth, were English in language and culture. And the new departure was further popularised by the achievements of two writers, of the same profession but poles asunder as regards literary worth and power; on the one hand, by the full and eloquent histories of William Robertson (1721-1793), and on the other, by the pseudo-critical writings of the insipid and loquacious rhetorician Hugh Blair (1718-1800) in whose sermons and letters—witness his pretentious and patronising epistle to Burns of May 1787—the ornate platitudinising manner of Shaftesbury reached its final extravagance and debasement.\* The national vanity was gratified by the success attained by these writers in the English style and manner of composition; and, followed by less competent professors, there thus arose in the literature of the north an imitation of English rather than English itself. Ramsay had caught and kept the ear of the public with his simple humorous compositions in the Scottish idiom. But those of his contemporaries who survived him, men of inferior genius for the most part, found themselves unable to command attention in their own tongue. They discovered that even Ramsay's popularity and reputation had suffered among the middle and upper classes; that his works had disappeared from their libraries and drawing-rooms, though they still kept their place on the shelves or in the pockets of the peasantry. Wherefore they studied

\* See Gosse *ut supra* p. 302: also *Letters of Burns* (Globe ed.) No. li.



to clear themselves of their Scottish idioms; and, as the case has been well put in respect of Thomson and Mallet, "to protect themselves from piratical publications in the neighbouring kingdoms, they betook themselves to England at once for improvement, fame, and profit."\* In this way the Scottish muses again lost their voice. The native faculty, at least, poured itself into foreign moulds, as had already happened during the humanistic revival of the previous century. Meston and Thomson and Hamilton had predeceased Ramsay—the first by thirteen years, the second by ten, the third by four. Mickle was then living in Edinburgh; but his poetic powers did not fully develop till a later date. Armstrong, a skilful and vigorous writer of the school of Thomson, was still living, but settled in London, where he continued to write, in imitation of the Queen Anne men and of older writers, till 1779. Mallet had been thirty years in England, had disgraced his reputation and defiled his pen there, and it was not to be expected that the betrayer of Bolingbroke and Pope would remember in song his former friend the poet-bookseller of the Luckenbooths. Blacklock, the blind bard who in after-times preserved Burns to his native country when he had resolved on emigrating to America, was then undergoing trials for license as a probationer of the Church of Scotland. And Home, our Scottish Otway, had been driven by the high Calvinistical party in the Kirk from his benefice at

\* See Ramsay's *Works* iii. *App.* vii. pp 251, 274.

Athelstaneford, where Blair of *The Grave*—the Young of the North—had died in 1746, because of the public representation of his celebrated tragedy of *Douglas*. Thus Ramsay, in a word, obtained no worthy threnody for ten years simply because with him, as Chambers pointed out, Scottish poetry was buried. The romantic fervour which originated with him showed signs of exhaustion at least; and the poetical field in Scotland was again left fallow for a time. At rare intervals, it is true, verses that had been shaken into shapes of breathing beauty by momentary breezes of emotion, fell lingeringly one by one like rose leaves on the untrodden turf. There remained accomplished singers like Bruce, in whom Burns took an interest later (see his letter to Principal Baird of 1791), and Mickle and Logan, who in a sense “rekindled all the fading melodies” of the fatherland. The *Elegy to Spring*, the poem on *Eskdale Braes*, the disputed *Ode to the Cuckoo* (one of the finest things in the language), and the lovely lines to *Autumn*, are productions through which we are enabled to catch sight or scent of the fadeless blossoms of that true Arcadia which Ramsay opened up to view. And yet, broadly speaking, the period that intervened between 1758 and 1773 was practically an era of dead-level cleverness in which Scottish poetry was again clothed in the conventional habit of the classicists.

## VIII.

AT length, however, a new writer of utterly distinct

idiosyncrasy made his appearance. This harbinger and announcing sign of oncoming changes of a sweeping kind was Robert Fergusson (1750-1774) who came to satisfy the true Scottish heart that yearned for something higher than *Helenore* and something more homebred than *The Minstrel*. A child of eight when his great precursor died, he arose to break the silence that had fallen on the land with light and lively snatches of song that recalled the blistering satire and sly touches of quaint humour of the old makers, and even, at times, those impulsively bewitching cadences that charm us in the seventeenth-century lyrics, and whose last warble died with Burns. At twenty-one he was the most famous Scottish poet of his day; "a prodigy destined to an early grave" unhappily, and yet a poet to be supplanted or equalled by none until the advent of his mightier brother thirteen years after his first and only publication was given to the world. In that slender volume Fergusson at once lamented the too apparent relapse of our poetry, and proclaimed his purpose to revive again the notes of the Doric reed. This appears from his *Elegy on the Death of Scots Music*, of which,—as I should have mentioned in last chapter when speaking of poetic adaptations and borrowings,—Burns's famous *Elegy on the Death of Captain Matthew Henderson* is simply a magnificent expansion, as the reader will at once perceive on comparing the poem named with these beautiful stanzas—

## THE HERITAGE OF BURNS.

Mourn ilka nymph and ilka swain,  
 Ilk sunny hill and dowie glen ;  
 Let weeping streams and Naiads drain  
     Their fountain head ;  
 Let echo swell the dolefu' strain,  
     Since Music's dead.

\*           \*           \*           \*

Nae lasses now, on simmer days,  
 Will lilt at bleaching of their claes ;  
 Nae herds on Yarrow's bonny braes,  
     Or banks of Tweed,  
 Delight to chant their hameil lays,  
     Since Music's dead.

\*           \*           \*           \*

Now foreign sonnets bear the gree,  
 And crabbit queer variety  
 Of sounds fresh sprung frae Italy,  
     A bastard breed !  
 Unlike that saft tongu'd melody  
     Which now lies dead.

Can lav'rocks at the dawning day,  
 Can linties chirming frae the spray,  
 Or todling burns that smoothly play  
     O'er gowden bed,  
 Compare wi' Birks of Indermay ?\*  
     But now they're dead.

O Scotland ! that cou'd yence afford  
 To bang the pith of Roman sword,  
 Winna your sons, wi' joint accord,  
     To battle speed,  
 And fight till Music be restor'd,  
     Which now lies dead ?

Thus Fergusson lamented the death of Scottish melody consequent on Ramsay's departure. But he

\* In allusion to Mallet's poem, so called.

took the hint himself threw out; and, during his brief career, fought till native music was restored. And the instrument he used was, to use his own phrase, an "aiten straw" plucked fresh from the fields of Midlothian. With this he showed that the simple mirth and pathos of the old makers was not irrecoverable; that even their artless poignancy of phrase had not yet passed beyond recall.

## IX.

THE writings by which Fergusson holds his high rank among the minor Scottish bards consist almost entirely of poems originally contributed, from 1771 onward, to *Ruddiman's Weekly Magazine*, and afterwards first collected in the small volume referred to which was published in 1773. These poems are distributed into two sorts — first, poems that treat of city characters and customs; and secondly, poems which deal with the innocent and healthy life of the country of whose pleasures he seldom tasted except in imagination. Most of these pieces, notwithstanding his avowed purpose, are composed in English; the remainder are written in the Scottish dialect; but the two sorts of writing shade continually into each other, for Fergusson could not get wholly rid of his native idioms, and seldom wrote in a pure English style. The poems written in the vernacular are those in which he appears as a true poet. His English verses

are not without lines and passages of poetry. They have occasionally the charm of ingenuity, of mind-play pure and simple. But they seldom rise above mediocrity. The best examples are the *Verses written at the Hermitage of Braid*, his *Last Will*, and *The Codicil*, and the *Epilogue of the Edinburgh Buck*. Fergusson's odes are in the manner of Collins; but they lack the tender gravity and subtlety of tone and command upon human emotion which gave distinction to the work of the great English lyrist whose fate was in some respects similar to his own. His eclogues again are reminiscent of the frigid and ephemeral pastorals of Philips. And his ballads are in the artificial-natural style; of undisguisable Shenstonian parentage; and probably more apt to provoke a smile than arouse one's sympathy. His burlesque heroics, in which he celebrates phases of city life,—of which that *On the Amputation of a Student's Hair*, is a good average specimen—are sometimes written, however, in smart English couplets, from which it may be inferred that his want of success in this class of composition arose less from a want of a perfect acquaintance with the English language than from his having preferred the Doric dialect for most of his happier themes. As I have already indicated, it is in the narrow section of his Scots poems (the volume of 1773 contained only nine dialect pieces) that the genius of Fergusson most unmistakably discovers itself.

And this leads me to say that, as a rule, the best of these vernacular poems are those which treat satirically of urban affairs. Fergusson had lived about town from his infancy, and was at home, as Burns never was, in describing the incidents of Scottish city life. In this we have at once the strength and weakness of his poetic gift. He could sketch with the fidelity of Kay and the humour of Hogarth the characters and classes of the city because he had lived amongst them—the wigged lawyers and consequential bailie-bodies, the skirling oyster wives and “sprushed” city guard, the “clashing servants” and the “usefu’ cadie,” the overdressed “Macarony” and the “plouky-nosed” *bon vivant*. But when he came to describe the incidents which fill up the evening hours under a Scottish farmer’s roof he entered a region with which he had but a casual and imperfect acquaintance. Burns’s *Cottar’s Saturday Night*, though modelled on it, surpasses Fergusson’s *Farmer’s Ingle* as a realistic delineation of the rural fireside simply because Burns knew it better than his prototype who, from this want of accurate personal knowledge could not possibly have shown Burns’s fidelity and circumstantiality of painting. The performance of family worship forms no part of Fergusson’s picture. In his time the practice had begun to be much neglected in our Scottish towns. But it was generally observed by the inhabitants of the country, particularly those of the western counties. And hence the simple nightly

service, the want of which forms a great deficiency in Fergusson's poem, colours all Burns's recollections. We have it on the authority of his brother Gilbert, indeed, that the familiar formula "Let us worship God," was the inspiring fact, as it is undoubtedly the keynote of this exquisite idyl. In his *Hallowe Fair* and *Leith Races*, however, or the *Ode to the Gowdspink* and *Auld Reikie*—the longest of his poems, and the only one which was begun on an extended plan—Fergusson comes nearer to Burns than any Scottish poet who preceded or came after him, although, it need hardly be said, whilst Burns is an imitator and continuator of Fergusson's style, the modes, not merely of his expression but of his thought, are essentially different, and his superiority of pathos and passion and the melody of song is equally self-evident. Fergusson is at his best and pithiest perhaps in such city lyrics as *The Daft Days* and *Caller Oysters*, or *Caller Water* and *Braid Claith*, and the verses addressed in whimsical vituperation *To the Tron Kirk Bell*, which reflect the spirit of Burns and are written in what has come to be arbitrarily spoken of as the Burns stanza. But there are vernacular poems of a different class, more suitable for quotation here in illustration of the dawning naturalism, which discover equally well the inner structure and quality of his genius. As an example of felicitous description take this picture of the gowdspink (or goldfinch, the most beautiful in its plumage of all Scottish songsters)



which the poet sees perched on “the new-bloom’d thorn” and scattering its full snowy flowers upon the green grass :—

Sure Nature herried mony a tree,  
 For sprains and bonny spats to thee ;  
 Nae mair the rainbow can impart  
 Sic glowing ferlies o’ her art,  
 Whase pencil wrought its freaks at will  
 On thee the sey-piece o’ her skill.  
 Nae mair through straths in simmer dight  
 We seek the rose to bless our sight ;  
 Or bid the bonny wa’-flowers blaw  
 Whare yonder Ruin’s crumblin’ fa’ :  
 Thy shining garments far outstrip  
 The cherries upo’ Hebe’s lip,  
 And fool the tints that Nature chose  
 To busk and paint the crimson rose.

Or take these lines from *Auld Reikie*, in which there is at once a heartfelt delight in nature and a keen quick sense of what is strongest and best and most tragic in Scottish history, roused into life by the scene which lies stretched out before him—here the wilds and the hills and the green fields sloping sharply from the Castle Rock down to the sombre old pile of Holyrood House ; and there the neglected Palace of Queen Mary with all its faded glories to touch the sensitive and patriotic heart of the city poet :—

While dandring cits delight to stray  
 To Castlehill, or public way,  
 Whare they nae other purpose mean,  
 Than that fool cause o’ being seen ;  
 Let me to Arthur’s Seat pursue,

Whare bonny pastures meet the view ;  
 And mony a wild-lorn scene accrues,  
 Befitting Willie Shakespeare's muse :  
 If Fancy there would join the thrang,  
 The desert rocks and hills amang,  
 To echoes we should lilt and play,  
 And gie to mirth the lee-lang day.  
 Or shou'd some canker'd biting shower  
 The day and a' her sweets deflow'r,  
 To Holy-rood-house let me stray,  
 And gie to musing a' the day ;  
 Lamenting what auld Scotland knew  
 Bien days for ever frae her view :  
 O Hamilton, for shame ! the Muse  
 Would pay to thee her couthy vows,  
 Gin ye wad tent the humble strain,  
 And gie's our dignity again :  
 For O, waes me ! the thistle springs  
 In domicile of ancient kings,  
 Without a patriot, to regrete  
 Our palace, and our ancient state.

The whole feeling of this is remarkably fine. A charm of Claude-like softness is thrown over the description. And yet an intense patriotism blends with deep original sensibility for native scenery ; and every line of the homely picture, which has the pure zest for nature without showing any tendency towards abstracted observation, is stamped with the authentic seal of a true poet.

## X.

THE claims of Fergusson rest on a comparatively small body of work ; and the faults of his poetry are

obvious enough. It should be remembered, however, that he died at twenty-four : that his course was very short and very miserable. He did not live long enough to develop a well-outlined character—in which respect he sometimes reminds us of Burns and Shelley ; neither had he a sufficiently long career as poet to allow of the gradual subordination of his temperament to the discipline of art—in which respect he recalls Chatterton and foreshadows Keats. If his unformed character exhibits strong and conflicting elements of good and evil, the inequality of his various productions betrays a rare and precocious talent rather than a gradually-maturing genius of daring design and fertile invention which nature had designed to achieve works of surpassing power and beauty. With all his brightness and quickness and fluency, he wants self-restraint, and the power of judging soundly of proportion and fitness. The effect aimed at and produced by his poems is to please the fancy, rather than edify the mind or touch the heart. And hence they discover a looseness and carelessness of thought and expression, partly belonging to his age, no doubt, but partly his own. They show more verve than virility, more acuteness than wisdom, more facility than force. His genius is essentially that of a youth made restless by vague desires not yet checked or regulated by experience. And his poems reflect the moods of his own undisciplined nature which has not yet been supplied with motives by the duties of life clearly perceived and cheerfully undertaken.

Nevertheless Fergusson's work marks an epoch in Scottish poetry. He is an original singer as Ramsay and Burns are original singers. And yet, like the first, he has the accent of the men from whom he learned to speak—of Dunbar and Lyndsay, to a certain extent, but, in fuller measure, of Hamilton and the prolific brood of seventeenth-century lyrists, from whom he borrows pieces of well-minted metal which pass from the melting-pot of his imagination, fused with his own materials, but often unchanged and as often unimproved, as appears, for instance, in his rendering of the old melody of *My ain kind dearie, O*, in his song of *The Lea-Rig* which was entirely superseded by the beautiful version written by Burns in October 1792. And, like the second, he follows and furthers the work of Ramsay in turning our literature from conventional themes and classical treatment to Scottish scenery and Scottish modes of life, albeit his verse bears deeper traces,—the result doubtless of his town and college training—of that conventional feigning which occasionally mars the naturalism of Ramsay, and colours even the homely picturings of Burns who seems at times to be wholly unaware of the comical incongruity into which he is thus led when he mixes the vernacular with the classical nomenclature of the Augustan poets. In short, Fergusson belongs, with some striking differences of circumstance as well as individual genius, to the school of Ramsay,

who had already opened up a rich and genuine vein of national poetry ; just as Burns, with whom Ramsay, by virtue of his lyrical genius, claims a closer affinity than Fergusson, may be said to belong to the same school, though it is open to remark that it was the younger bard who most fully discovered to Burns, if indeed, he did not instinctively perceive, how fertile a field for the exercise of his peculiar powers lay in the characters and customs of the Scottish peasantry. The impress of Fergusson's genius is seen both in the topics of Burns's verse and the form of Burns's expression. But Fergusson himself derives from Ramsay a great part of what he transmits to Burns. His poems abound in happy pictures of local manners and customs, in a quaint and pawky humour, and a hearty sympathy with the genial and joyous in human life, that continually remind us of his predecessor. And yet, whilst obviously a follower and imitator of Ramsay, whose *Evergreen* was as enthusiastically studied by him as Chapman's *Homer* was by Keats, so that he habitually adopts those awkward closes to his stanzas of "Sae white that day" or "Wi' straiks this day" which Allan introduced and Burns again reproduced with somewhat monotonous iteration in *The Holy Fair* and *Halloween* and *The Ordination*, we find in the best work of Fergusson that indefinable newness and unexpectedness which we call genius. He has the sympathetic imagination which can

identify itself with the special objects of its contemplation, be it a gowdspink or the Tron Kirk bell. And he has also something of that shaping faculty and unerring instinct for the poetic uses of things which you only find in writers of undoubted inspiration who convert fine words into pictures and thrilling aspects of earth and sky into means of culture and spiritual worship. Nor is Fergusson unconscious of his power. On the contrary, he asserts with fervour his own particular claims to recognition in those lines with which his beautiful vernacular *Ode to the Bee* concludes :—

Like thee, by fancy wing'd, the Muse  
 Scuds ear' and heartsome o'er the dews,  
 Fu' vogie, and fu' blyth to crap  
 The winsome flow'rs frae Nature's lap  
 Twining her living garlands there,  
 That lyart time can ne'er impair.

Fergusson's abilities then are great, and his knowledge not small. No one will deny his graphic humour and nervous sense and limpid ease of narrative. No one will dispute the freshness and piquancy of his style, and the effectiveness of the domestic scenes depicted by him. But his lyric range is narrow, and his sense of melody is sometimes dull. His pastorals are in the false classical style, and of little value. Several of his lightest and most telling satirical effusions are wanting in grace of movement. And many of his dialect poems, though not contemp-

tible, neither deserve nor are likely to receive long remembrance. Like others of his class he has been shamefully neglected from his own generation to ours. To the student his poetry must always possess interest and value, and much of it still thrills the general heart across the generations that separate us. But in view of the transcendent genius of Burns, whom the Scottish peasantry love as never people loved a poet, it is doubtful whether his lyrics—even the very best of them—can ever hope to regain the popular ear. In a word, his poetic gift, which did not tempt him to climb “the stey braes o’ the muses ground,”—as we read in his *Epistle to Andrew Gray*—but kept him to the lower levels where he pulled a “few poetic gowans,” which he rightly says shall “never wither,” showed itself as an immature longing or instinctive striving to possess the honeyed sweets of poesy, rather than a well-defined faculty or adequate realising power. Genius, in the highest sense of the word, cannot be claimed for Fergusson. He is in some respects inferior to Ramsay; and, save as an inspiring and formative influence, not to be mentioned in the same breath with Burns. Enthusiastic contemporaries were wont to liken him to Ramsay. But, his biographer informs us, he refused the idle compliment in no pleasant mood. And one may be permitted to wonder how he would have received the more extravagant flatteries of a later day that raised him to the level of the

world's greatest lyric, had he lived to see the full fruition of Burns's powers, or heard the ecstatic homage paid to him by Burns himself whenever his name was mentioned.

It would be to do him the greatest injustice of criticism—overpraise—to claim for Fergusson so high a place in the poetic hierarchy. He is the best, perhaps the only, illustration of the utmost that could be done in song-craft by a man of facile talent and poetic temperament after Ramsay's death and before the advent of Burns. Indeed it may be said that none but a poet of originality, of rare sense of beauty and power of imagination and music, could have been the delight, and, to a certain extent, the poetical master of Burns, in whose generous heart the memory of Fergusson awakened a singular passion of sympathy, admiration, and regret. As already noted, it was the reading of his little volume of 1773 that induced the greater minstrel to resume "his wildly sounding lyre" when in his early manhood he had for a time laid it aside. And we must never forget, whilst tracing the evolution of that poetic naturalism which culminated in Burns, what has been so happily said by Dr Service in his discriminating account of Fergusson, that "his *juvenilia* were not written by his own hand, but by a poetical predecessor still more prococious than himself."\* This is high praise. But it is in large measure

\* See Ward's *English Poets*, iii., p. 501.



unassailably true, and, although expressed in a paradoxical form, enables us to discriminate with sufficient clearness Fergusson's exact place in the history of Scottish poetry. He led the way, in other words, and made it possible to greater men and greater things. He exercised a vivifying and fertilising influence over the mind of the poet who succeeded him as the world's great "singer of man to men." He quickened, if he did not implant, in Burns's soul the poetic love of nature for her own sake. And he also set before him, even more than Ramsay or any earlier precursor, a certain standard of execution—not of technical correctness, for which Burns with his "random clink" seldom showed special concern; \* but of that quality to which he himself refers when, writing to Thomson in September 1793, he speaks of "bursting at once into the pathos" of a song without any "starting-note, as the fiddlers call it." It may be defined as the continual endeavour after sheer vividness of imagery and terse vigour of descriptive phrase. A typical instance is to be found of this verbal felicity and prevailing truthfulness of nature and of vision in the homely humorous poem of *The auld Farmer's New-year-morning Salutation to his auld Mare*. The veritable pre-Raphaelitism of this compact and graphic picture of the sturdy old mare patiently pulling the plough with pith and power through the stiff and root-bound soil of the furzy braes, is literally unsurpassed in Scottish poetry:—

\* See *Letters of Burns* (Globe ed.), No. ccl.

Thou never braing't, an' fetch't, and fliskit,  
 But thy auld tail thou wad hae whiskit,  
 An' spread abreed thy weel-fill'd briskit,  
                                 Wi' pith an' pow'r,  
 Till spritty knowes wad rair't and riskit,  
                                 An' slypet owre.

Not only would English words have failed to express with the same musical force all that is here implied, but elaborate re-touchings would have marred a picture that is obviously painted offhand with a few vivid strokes of a well-loaded brush.

Now Fergusson's pieces of good graphic Scotch—*The Daft Days* and *Leith Races*, *Hallow Fair* and *The Farmer's Ingle*—first taught Burns to aim at this beauty of intense and convincing truth rather than the beauty of mere fancy and of sound. And, in proof of the unexampled success that attended his earliest efforts, it is only necessary to point to such a poem as *Halloween* (1785) in which he has done off with one or two vivid strokes a dozen distinct pictures of Ayrshire lads and lasses, and their sires and dames, with the antique customs, superstitious observances, and social habits of the country which even then were dying out or fast fading from men's remembrance. In the distinctive power of completing his word-pictures of nature and human life with a few swift touches that combine forcible realism with the great quality of positive poetic richness of colour-tone, so that his delineations live in the "memory of the eye" with all the wholeness and

tenacity of an actual painting by Teniers or Holbein, Fergusson frequently surpasses Ramsay, and, at times, does not fall far short even of Burns himself in whose work, however, the master-chord of humanity is always struck with greater force and fulness. It may be said that Fergusson though endowed with a rare song-gift was not fully master of his poetic means. There is no denying this. But the fact is to be explained not by immaturity or want of practice so much as by the very versatility of his artistic power and the catholicity of his youthful sympathies. In spite of all, the fact remains that it was through the somewhat bewildering cross-lights of this erratic and half-formed genius that Burns obtained his first Pisgah-vision of that ideal and immortal kingdom of supreme creative art where he was destined to rule over all without a rival—the master of a “kingless sphere” in a “heaven of song.” Fergusson’s *hameil* strains were indubitably the starting points, as I have throughout implied, of Burns’s noblest triumphs. And this, I think, fixes his historic place in Scottish literature. Not great in himself, perhaps, he was yet great in this that he reanimated the dormant muse of Burns, determined the Scottish character of Burns’s poetry,\* and supplied the indispensable connecting link between Ramsay

\* But for this, Lockhart has rightly said (*Life of Burns*, p. 32), “it would be difficult to account for the very high terms in which Burns always mentions his productions.” Cf. Ward *ut supra* iii., p. 502.

and Burns who, focalising the scattered rays of his immediate precursors, eclipsed them both when he effulged all at once with the steady radiance of a sun, to liberate the energies and lighten the darkened hearts of men, and, in an era of revolt and resurrection, make life glow with a finer or fiercer flame. A knowledge of Fergusson as a type of forcible realism in poetic art is, therefore, absolutely necessary as an introduction to the complete study of Burns, his imitator and counterpart.

## XI.

EVEN the outer facts of their life as singers bring these two together in a striking way. And there is one circumstance in particular which the sympathetic and discerning critic will not care to overlook. Death robbed the world of Fergusson's maturity in October 1774. But a deep remedial force was working even then to repair the loss. We are told that in his last days of weakness and delirium he often sang in tones of tremulous tenderness Mallet's once popular pastoral song of *The Birks of Invermay*. And those who listened to him and noted the ever-deepening signs of mental aberration seemed to hear in that song a dirge of infinite pathos over the grave of creative imagination. For, like a tree rent and riven by lightning, his intellect was hopelessly blasted: the all-potent sap of human invention could no longer

flow ; and in semi-lucid intervals that came like

Moonlight on a troubled sea  
Brightening the storm it cannot calm,

he went back to those favourite Scottish melodies of his early childhood that still lingered in the popular heart though they could wake no responsive echo in his own. But as Fergusson's failing hand was about to quit forever the keys of his well-tryed and once supple instrument, there arose, unheeded in the west, the quivering cradle-cry or first lisping accents of a new-born poetic power. For it was in this year 1774, and most likely in this very month of October, that love and poetry began with Robert Burns.

At the small upland farm of Mount Oliphant near the Brig o' Doon, the poet's partner in the harvest field was a "bewitching creature" called Nelly Kilpatrick. She followed him, according to the fashion of the time, close through the golden rigs, binding, as he cut with the sickle, the rustling poppy-mingled corn, and leading the home-going song of the reapers and sheaf-binders in tones of rippling music that made his "heart-strings thrill like an Æolian harp." It was this sonsie little village lass who, in a scene appropriately Arcadian in its tender innocence, first took possession of his impulsive and capricious heart. And as the result of this

hectic but harmless passion he afterwards composed in "wild enthusiasm" the simple artless little ballad commencing *O, once I loved a bonnie lass*. It is avowedly a puerile first attempt at rhyme. And yet in the half-grown grace of a quatrain such as this one may detect a foretaste of the fluent fancy of his riper and more precious products :—

She dresses aye sae clean and neat,  
Baith decent and genteel,  
*And then there's something in her gait*  
*Gars ony dress look weel.*

Crude and insignificant as the lyric is, one may say that at no period of his life need Burns have felt ashamed of the lines here printed in italics. And the poem is at least noteworthy as the first chirping of the true song-bird whose pleasant carolling thenceforward filled the air with bright and sparkling melody. Call it if you will, and as you may, the sportive childish treble of a glowing and impassioned ploughboy. It nevertheless contained, though men knew it not, the promise of the whole future of Scottish song, just as the sunny skies of an Italian April are filled with "the hidden ecstasy of larks." It was the pledge vouchsafed by the Muses that the apostolic succession of poetic thought, which the untimely death of Fergusson had so rudely disturbed, would be kept alive in Scotland by one who would soon emerge from his peasant obscurity in the pastoral solitudes of Coila to awake

the world, like Apollo, to a new day, and sweep with the hand of a master the whole gamut of human experience, from the lowest note to the very top of its compass.

Burns and Fergusson were brothers in affliction as in song. In the life of each disaster followed disaster ; and Death or Madness stood forever by to close it with a Tragedy. For if Fergusson had his dark seasons of outer and of inner life, and died a pitiable, almost unpitied, spectacle of crack-brained imbecility, Burns, who was no stranger to rebellious pride and bedlam passions, has himself confessed that his "constitution and frame were *ab origine* blasted with a deep incurable taint of hypochondria" which poisoned his existence. And the moods of settled melancholy that periodically overclouded his whole nature are hardly less touching at times than the dementia and distraction in which the life of his forerunner closed. But at the time of which I am now writing, the relentless Destiny that from youth to manhood dogged their footsteps, and prevented genius in both cases from reaching maturity, had already closed in upon the one and brought him to the dust. To the other it still continued as a dim foreboding, a dreaded possibility, or at worst appeared only in the "unceasing moil of a galley slave" to which his fate in these early years condemned him. In October 1774 whilst Fergusson, alone, without a hand to help or an eye to pity, was dying on a bed of loose

uncovered straw in the wretched public asylum that then stood within a gloomy nook of the old city wall of Edinburgh, Burns, as yet but a fresh-coloured farmboy with healthy sunburnt face and big black eyes, was gaily crooning to himself the "crambo-jingle" and roving, from dawn to dark, "where busy ploughs were whistling thrang," or else pursuing one of his many love-adventures in the moon-charmed stillness of the autumn night at Alloway, when his long and heavy day's darg was done.

And thus it happened that when Fergusson was cut off in the greenest of his days, with the brilliant promise of his intellect unfulfilled, the Doric lamp which his genius had replenished and rekindled was not extinguished. It gave but a pathetic flicker, and then proved its inextinguishable vitality through a brighter flame. Imagination of the native order was not annihilated but transmigrant. For almost simultaneously the divine afflatus touched the wonder-working mind of Robert Burns, our Scottish Prometheus; and the Muse of Caledonia placed in his puissant hand the torch of intelligence with which, thirteen years later, he was to fire "the standing-corn of thought," and, inspired by the noblest spirit of humanity, pour upon the land a flood of song that has helped largely to regenerate and exalt the race, to hallow Scotland and the Scottish tongue, to cheer men's hearts with new hopes and splendid vistas, and form an impregnable rallying-point of patriotism for all succeeding ages.



## CHAPTER V.

### THE NEW ERA : BURNS.

#### 1.

WHAT Burns would have been without Ramsay and Fergusson, how far his more powerful hand and fertile brain would have moulded Scottish poetry without Ramsay and Fergusson, cannot even be surmised. What alone is obvious to every student is that Burns deigned from the first to tread in the footsteps of these two, and that he at last completed and developed to the utmost that village-maiden Muse which they had rescued from oblivion and re-clothed with the native garb, entirely homespun, in warp and woof, like the stout-fibred hoddin gray that formed the ancient cottar's only wear. They had not his force of wit, his fire of passion, his lark-like note of genuine lyric rapture. Yet it was under their hand that the type of poetic art which was destined to endure and triumph in Scotland took form, grew steadily, and became a thing of power and beauty. All the earlier efforts, of the national genius which they had collected and worked upon were completed and accomplished, it is true, in the mature self-conscious art of Burns. Their

works, however, were seminal. But for them indeed the full-blown lyrical loveliness of the Ayrshire Bard would in all probability have been lost to the world. The poems of Ramsay, we know, fell early into his hands. *The Tea Table Miscellany* and *The Gentle Shepherd* appear conspicuously in the list of books read and re-read in the laborious days at Mount Oliphant and Lochlea. In Ruddiman's *Weekly Magazine* he had obtained casual glimpses of Fergusson's tentative efforts; and in 1782 at Irvine he obtained a reading of his collected poems, published nine years before. These, as already noted, excited his emulation, enriched his phraseology, and supplied him with models of versification; albeit, as Heron his first biographer pointed out, Burns had made himself master of powers of language superior to those of almost any former writer in the Scottish tongue, before he conceived the idea of surpassing his immediate forerunners.

The ambitious idea thus early implanted did not bear fruit till a later date. As mentioned in last chapter, his first lyric,—a thing of slight poetic merit, yet not unmarked by a certain native grace and unencumbered charm,—belongs to the year of Fergusson's death. But it was not until ten years later that the blossoming spring-time of his genius was reached. It was in 1784 or 1785 that Burns first discovered his true destiny. One or other of these

years marks the uprising and blooming of a free poetic life. His first two harvests in the bare upland farm of Mossgiel had failed; and this appears to have "done something to drive him in on his own internal resources," and to awaken the conviction that poet, not ploughman, was his destined vocation. His failure as a farmer suddenly supplied the strongest stimulus to the more perfect development of that gift of expression of which he had already shown himself possessed, and furnished indeed a noble aim to a life that had hitherto been aimless. What to most would have been a period of fruitless gloom and despondency, was to him a time of supreme promise and expectation. If, he actually argued with himself when baited with farming and other difficulties, success is denied me in the calling thrust on me by circumstance, may I not find success in another and more congenial employment? There was another world to which he could and would appeal. The hand that could lift the flail and drive the plough could also wield a pen. And thus it happened in the accidents of earth, or, as one might more truly say, in the ordinances of heaven, that Burns rose up to be our supreme national poet, and more than fulfilled the utmost promise of that dawning hope which began to gladden his heart in the twenty-fifth year of his age, that he might yet find a place of lengthened renown among the bards of Scotland. Probably poetry owes as much, in a way, to the infertility of the sour cold

clay-soil of Mossgiel, as it does to the severe and exacting temper of the Puritan baronet of Warwickshire, whose unrelenting persecution of Shakespeare in the matter of the deer-stealing episode in Fulbroke Park induced the writing of that retaliatory satirical ballad upon Sir Thomas Lucy which is supposed to have been the cause of the poet's leaving Stratford and joining his old friends and associates the players in London.

To this animating hope so strangely engendered, and the noble aims so suddenly begotten of it, Burns gives expression both in prose and verse. In his commonplace book there occurs the following modest entry, of the probable date of August 1784 :—

However I am pleased with the works of our Scotch poets, particularly the excellent Ramsay, and the still more excellent Fergusson, yet I am hurt to see other places of Scotland, their towns, rivers, woods, and haughs, immortalized in such celebrated performances, while my dear native country,—the ancient baileries of Carrick, Kyle, and Cunningham, famous both in ancient and modern times for a gallant and warlike race of inhabitants—a country where civil, and particularly religious liberty, have ever found their first support, and their last asylum—a country, the birthplace of many famous philosophers, soldiers, and statesmen, and the scene of many important events recorded in Scottish history, particularly a great many of the actions of the glorious Wallace, the saviour of his country—yet we have never had one Scotch poet of any eminence to make the fertile banks of Irvine, the romantic woodlands and sequestered scenes of Ayr, and the heathy mountainous source and winding sweep of Doon, emulate Tay, Forth, Ettrick, Tweed. This is a complaint I would gladly remedy; but, alas! I am far unequal to the task, both in native

genius and in education. Obscure I am, obscure I must be, though no young poet's nor young soldier's heart ever beat more fondly for fame than mine.

The lyric tendency, as we have seen, had been pretty general in Scotland before the advent of Burns. Even at this moment of blossoming, in the north and in the south alike, every breeze may be said to have been dusty with golden pollen wafted from new-born flowers of native song. This is expressly acknowledged in the extract given below. And yet there still existed a special want which Burns, in the first flush of his new-born power, felt impelled to supply. The thought expressed above in somewhat ungrammatical prose is substantially repeated, and his purpose more fully disclosed, in his sprightly poetical *Epistle to William Simpson* of May 1785 :—

Ramsay an' famous Fergusson  
 Gied Forth an' 'Tay a lift aboon ;  
 Yarrow an' Tweed, to monie a tune,  
     Owre Scotland rings,  
 While Irwin, Lugar, Ayr, an' Doon,  
     Naebody sings.

Th' Ilissus, Tiber, Thames, an' Seine,  
 Glide sweet in monie a' tuneftu' line !  
 But, Willie, set your fit to mine,  
     An' cock your crest,  
 We'll gar our streams an' burnies shine  
     Up wi' the best.

We'll sing auld Coila's plains an' fells,  
 Her moors red-brown wi' heather bells,

Her banks an' braes, her dens an' dells,  
 Where glorious Wallace  
 Aft bure the gree, as story tells,  
 Frae Southron billies.

But with all his self-concentration upon this peculiar and provincial aim, Burns could not long ignore those general interests which at first seemed not only to lie beyond the scope of his undisciplined powers but to be external to poetry as he then conceived it. Hence as his genius ripened and mellowed, the limited ambition of the provincial rhymmer grew into that of the national bard and gnomic world-poet. The incipient hope that in 1784 and 1785 had haunted his heart,—avowedly ruled from first to last by subborn pride, unbridled passion, and an intense patriotism,—is discovered in the *Epistle to the Gude Wife of Wauchope House* of 1787, when read in connection with the prose extract also given below, to have developed from a simple aspiration to celebrate in song the plains and fells and streams of Coila, into the wider and nobler ambition to vindicate the claims of his country generally and of the old national language to consideration and respect. Let the reader compare these retrospective lines :—

E'en then, a wish, I mind its power,  
 A wish that to my latest hour  
 Shall strongly heave my breast,  
 That I for poor Auld Scotland's sake  
 Some usefu' plan or beuk could make,  
 Or sing a sang at least.

The rough burr-thistle, spreading wide  
Amang the bearded bear,  
I turn'd the weeder-clips aside,  
An' spar'd the symbol dear. —

with those words addressed to Mrs Dunlop in a letter dated from Edinburgh, 22nd March 1787 :—

The appellation of a Scottish bard is by far my highest pride ; to continue to deserve it is my most exalted ambition. Scottish scenes and Scottish story are the themes I could wish to sing. I have no dearer aim than to have it in my power, unplagued with the routine of business, for which heaven knows I am unfit enough, to make leisurely pilgrimages through Caledonia ; to sit on the fields of her battles ; to wander on the romantic banks of her rivers ; and to muse by the stately towers or venerable ruins, once the honoured abodes of her heroes.

It is clear then that it was originally Burns's intention only to illustrate his own native province ; to shed upon its haughs and hills, its gently-gliding streams of Lugar, Ayr, and Doon, that power which the balladists had already cast over the glens and moorlands of that passionate pastoral world which is watered by the Yarrow and the Teviot and the Tweed. But his patriotism could not figure long in a merely local garb. His was a power which could not be confined within a dim parochial corner of the universe. The advancing forces of the modern era, as I endeavoured to show in the second division of my book, pressed upon him, not as dreams and fantasies, but with the iron weight of actuality. And his poetry being, like all great poetry, universal in its appeal to human

nature, was at once and forever put beyond reach of decay when, as in the extract last given, his imagination rose above the placid rule of traditional life and those narrowly localised observances which had at first inflamed it. Obscure Burns truly was in his brief day of dim unmastered possibilities. But his puissant and irrepressible spirit shot through the short-lived obscurities of his peasant-environment, as the sun, fresh-risen from the sea, pierces in the pride of its godlike strength the filmy and ephemeral mists of an April dawn. Superbly solitary, Burns soon became the companion of all thoughts; "bred to the plough," but fearless, independent, and unashamed of his "honest rusticity," his homespun fancies swiftly domesticated themselves in all imaginations. With a spirituality of touch all its own, his genius first conquered his native Ayrshire. But its arrowy radiations soon began to illuminate, as with "a fiery sleet of words and images," a wider sphere; and eventually girdled the whole planet with an undying blaze of transfiguring light. The servant and the singer of Kyle and Bonny Jean, as Dante was "of Florence and of Beatrice," Burns, sustained by his own adolescent fearlessness and strength, developed into the world's unrivalled singer of man to men.

## II.

AND this leads me to remark that it was pre-eminently Burns's mission to free thought and style from tradition



and convention, and to institute or at least recall an era of natural life. In the words of a great living singer—

He came when poets had forgot  
 How rich and strange the human lot :  
 How warm the tints of Life : how hot  
                   Are Love and Hate :  
 And what makes truth divine, and what  
                   Makes manhood great.

\*           \*           \*           \*

He saw 'tis meet that man possess  
 The will to curse as well as bless,  
 To pity—and be pitiless,  
                   To make, and mar :  
 The fierceness that from tenderness  
                   Is never far. \*

His characteristic and revealing work really lay in adding to poetry fresh poetic material enriched with motives drawn direct from the innermost heart of humanity ; in shattering the old and creating new and well-defined ideals of art and life which had become staid and tame under the passionless and perverting reign of conventional authority. To approach the real world, to take it as it was and for what it was, and at the same time to penetrate it with sudden spiritual fire—that was the primary aim of Burns's poetry. From the commencement to the close of his career his verse was one continuous and impassioned protest in favour of naturalness, and of human as opposed to the mock-heroic sentiments of the pseudo-classical school.

\* Mr William Watson : See his strong Ode on the "Tomb of Burns" in *The Father of the Forest and Other Poems*.

Gie me ae spark o' Nature's fire,  
That's a' the learning I desire ;  
Then tho' I drudge thro' dub an' mire  
At pleugh or cart,  
My Muse, though hamely in attire,  
May touch the heart.

It is thus he addressed his rhyme-composing brother John Lapraik in April 1785. And the lines may be said to strike the keynote of Burns's unsophisticated art. For, veiling nothing that savoured of virility, it betokened in the fullest sense the emergence of man's inner self in all the nakedness of austere truth. The great merit of the new poet lay not so much in that ideal method of treatment by which he glorified common things, as in *The Cottar's Saturday Night*, or gilded with a ray of enthusiasm, as in *Halloween*, the simple incidents of rustic life—for Ramsay and Fergusson, to say nothing of Dunbar, had already done that—as in the deeper sympathy with every phase of human feeling, and the errorless insight into all the essential qualities or elementary passions of human nature, which he displayed in every line that he wrote. Burns, who had more of the penetrative and sympathetic imagination which belongs to the creative poet than either Ramsay or Fergusson, not only contributed to the transformation of style, and taught his native language how to soar and sing, but by the splendours of his fancy and the novel harmonies of his verse he gave a new force and attraction to those everlasting realities of the mind which had degenerated

in the verse of the Augustan poets and their Scottish imitators into the most artificial abstractions—into fantastic unrealities that pretended to be real and had been accepted as such in an age of gas and gulosity. In the ideal point of view which Burns first revealed to his countrymen, and which Cowper was the first to perceive if Wordsworth was the first to adopt, quite as much as in the Tenier's-like realism of his delineations of pastoral life whose interest far transcended the parish limits of his own generation, do we find his indisputable claim to be regarded as *the* master and renovator of Scottish poetry.

And it must be borne in mind that Burns's work of revival and reform was the deliberate result of intelligent purpose, and, in a sense, of ample culture. I do not mean that he premeditated a systematic scheme of poetic reform like that conceived by Wordsworth under the stimulating influence of Burns's verse and in direct opposition to the prevailing habits of the eighteenth century, twelve years after Burns's first formal appearance as poet. What I mean is that even in his earliest youth, "when beardless, young, and blate," Burns saw clearly and felt keenly that it was essential, even after the much-admired achievements of Ramsay and Fergusson, to bring poetry back to a closer and more intimate understanding with nature. Of course many objections may be offered to this theory. It may be said, for instance, that with Burns passion and

instinct ruled the hour. But, whilst admitting this, it may be answered that manliness and simplicity, the necessary co-efficients with passion in producing poetry of purest tone and enduring quality, were also leading elements in his character. And if his vigorous understanding enabled him to perceive the limitations of his precursors and the capacities for noble art inherent in native poetry, his more puissant and wonder-working genius also enabled him to prove by his practice its adaptation to higher purposes and wider-reaching ends than any foreseen or attained by Ramsay and Fergusson. They were necessary no doubt to render the advent of Burns as decisive as it proved. They discerned and rescued the true and living germs of art from the conflicting elements and chaotic literary activities of a period of transition and upheaval. But they were unable, as Burns was able, by his own individual achievements, not only to set its growth beyond all risks of accident but to bring it at once to its highest possible development. In spite of this it may still be affirmed that Burns was to all intents and purposes but an imitator and continuator of the poetic efforts of Ramsay and Fergusson who, when they first tuned the Doric reed after a long interval of silence, virtually re-created the taste which the work of their mightier successor was destined to satisfy. And I have throughout frankly acknowledged this. But I have also endeavoured to show that in the final analysis

originality consists quite as much in the power of using to purpose what already existed, as in that of producing what is absolutely new. And it therefore detracts nothing from the value of *The Holy Fair*, for instance, when we admit that one of the chief merits which this satire discovers to us is the poet's reorganising spirit or faculty of combining the separate and less effectual conceptions of Fergusson, as revealed in *Leith Races*, into new shapes of vital thought that serve high moral ends. For it is precisely in this remodelling of old material, in this transfiguration of the right poetic stuff, that Burns oftentimes most truly shows himself a creative poet. But, again, it may be argued that, whilst shaking himself free of the conventional way of looking at nature which still prevailed, and strenuously endeavouring to take the imagination further away from cities and city manners to the simple rustic life and broad scenery of Lowland Scotland, Burns was still influenced by the artificial-natural poets of the previous generation—especially by Pope and Thomson and Shenstone—and even perpetuated the coarser spirit and traditions of that old world of Scottish art which was awaiting reconstruction and purification at his hands. And this is in large measure unassailably true. But the fact in no way invalidates my position. Carlyle in his efforts to explain the natural history of so original a mind has certainly called him a "prodigy"; but no one has ever suggested that Burns was an "autoch-

thonous birth" of the Scottish soil, without ancestors and without kindred. Even he to whom was given the power "of making man's life more venerable," could not escape from his intellectual ancestors or fail to show in his writings the chief poetical influences of his time. Naturally enough we find in a few of his poems touches of rhetoric and traces of the old conventional feigning. Take, for instance, the much-admired poem of *A Winter Night*. In fifty lines we have no less than twenty-four impersonations—feelings, passions, weather, events; everything he touches he personifies straight away. In writing this otherwise excellent poem he proceeded on the bad models supplied by the classical poets of his early reading. As Wordsworth was influenced by Milton and by Burns, so Burns himself was influenced by Ramsay and Fergusson and the English poets of their time. And in the one case as in the other harm as well as good was the result. But after every just deduction is made the fact remains that Burns revived, reformed, *remade* Scottish poetry and deliberately put the conventionalists to silence. For his distinctive excellence lies not merely in that simple observation of common things which he resumed, but in that heart-stirring and heart-changing force of fierce natural passion, and that irresistible stream of pure human affection with which he vitalised and enriched the life and art of eighteenth-century Scotland. Before his day no poetic reformer had ever dared to be passionate as he was.\*

\* See Saintsbury *History of Nineteenth Century Literature*, 1896, p. 17.

And in the way in which he redeemed poetry from the coldness of symbolic art and infused the warm blood of his own untamable heart into the veins of his countrymen, lay Burns's great lesson for his age and for his nation.

When he appeared the ancient spirit of Scotland was at a low ebb. The prejudices of the dominant nation had relegated Scotchmen, whose dialect it despised, to a place with the immemorial butts of English fiction,—what Lockhart calls “the Jockies and Archies of farce.” The national feeling was becoming tame and colourless, and the vernacular was again falling into disuse, a Scotticism being the one thing of which men of splendid genius, like Hume and Smollett or even Burns's own correspondent Dr Moore, most dreaded to be convicted.\* The Edinburgh *literati* of 1786—Robertson, Blair, Stewart, Smith, Monboddo, and Mackenzie, to mention only the chief stars that then made a galaxy in the northern heavens,—were Scotchmen only in name and dwelling-place. But the whole condition of affairs was instantly changed when Burns lifted up his prevailing voice in Ayrshire. The Scottish life which popular cosmopolitan writers had ignored was wisely chosen by him for poetic interpretation. The dialect which they had despised was again brought into favour when he took it for his vehicle, and raised both the matter and the metre of Doric poetry to heights as yet unappre-

\* See Shairp's *Burns* (English Men of Letters), p. 196.

hended in his day. And the tide of patriotic feeling which had been gradually sinking to its lowest ebb-mark was suddenly carried to full flood when he revived in his flowing and melodious verse the romantic incidents of Scottish history, and brought back to the hearts of his countrymen the long-forgotten emotions of the old national life. Burns placed the present in closer and more vital relation with the great historic past. He gave a new artistic potency and beauty to the rural poetry of his country, but he also reasserted the Scottish spirit as it existed before "the old kingdom" had been despoiled of all her venerated symbols of royalty and nationality, and before the harshness and severity of the Puritan temper had damped the ardour and dulled the enthusiasm of the people. Born to liberalise men's minds, to inflame their hearts, to enlarge their moral horizons, Burns, "rejoicing more than other men in the spirit of life that was in him," brought back humanity to the gay and gracious light of a secular day after a mirthless century of religious strife. The sensuousness, the frolicsome vivacity, the vigorous mundane vitality—everything indeed that the stern Calvinism or milder Arminianism of Reformers and Covenanters and their successors of the Auld Light party in the West with their invincible artistic antipathies had striven to stamp out—lived anew in him. Capable of great ideas, free in a remarkable degree from the common bigotries of his class, and, above all things, unswervingly true to the truth, Burns produced poetry



which in its first forms promised to be merely local, or, at best, national, but ultimately became what Scottish poetry had never been before, even in Dunbar's time,—the great mirror in which universal man was reflected in all the breadth and emphasis of his manifold interests, convictions, and activities. For Burns observe wrote with a clear eye to posterity, as Dante and Shakespeare and Milton wrote,—not for an age, but for all time. In other words, he was, as I have said, fully aware of his object; and, great as it was, his abilities proved equal to its realisation. Properly speaking Burns had no scholarship any more than Shakespeare had. In the strictly academic sense he had no culture any more than Ramsay had. In respect of artistic creativeness he was indebted neither less nor more than Fergusson to intellectual ancestry and helpful kindred. And in the matter of world-wisdom his experience, it must be allowed, was bounded and coloured, as theirs was not, by the narrow limits and monotonizing character of a struggling peasant's life that seemed at first to promise or provide no avenue of escape from what himself tersely described as "the cheerless gloom of a hermit with the unceasing moil of a galley-slave." But pinched as he was by poverty, shaken as he was by trials without and "passions raging like denons" within, doomed as he was to the dull drudgery of a farm, unversed in the learning of the schools and harassed and striving life-long, Burns had yet a sovereign eye, and delicate senses,

and a receptive and high-strung heart that responded to every throb or thrill of human passion and human pathos like a stringed instrument that vibrates responsively to the faintest tremblings of another. And with these he absorbed and assimilated and reproduced, at a touch, and often in a single line, a culture and a knowledge to which poets, more versed than he in the world's lore and in the *technique* of poetry, can lay no claim. Though the very shuttlecock of fortune, with mean opportunities and almost no patron but his own right hand, he was yet able to apprehend and satisfy the clamant wants, and voice, in lyrics that tremble and cry with melodious emotion, the striving impulses of his age and nation. For his vigorous understanding developed in equal measure with the divine faculty that was in him; and, faithful to his own simple and natural ideals, he eventually produced something that is still felt to be more inspiring for us than the most glorious utterances of merely intellectual power, although it seldom discovers to us beings or circumstances that are alien from his own person or his own experience.\*

### III.

Now these conclusions, it seems to me, are fully borne out by certain statements contained in the Preface to the Kilmarnock volume of *Poems, Chiefly*

\* See Lockhart *ut supra* p. 251.

*in the Scottish Dialect, by Robert Burns*,—the publication of which on 31st July 1786, with the appropriate motto—

The simple bard, unbroke to rules of art,  
 He pours the wild effusions of the heart ;  
 And if inspired, 'tis Nature's powers inspire—  
 Hers all the melting thrill, and hers the kindling fire—

may be said to mark one of the most important epochs in British literature ; and in the Dedication of its successor, the first Edinburgh edition of April 1787. Taken together these writings not only discover the fact that Burns himself had formed some true estimate of the real worth of his poems, but that the motives by which he was actuated in their production were such as I have stated them to be. The original preface is described by Lockhart as “modest and manly.” And the characterisation is eminently just, notwithstanding the fact that it is probably the most pedantic, tautological, and ungrammatical specimen of the poet's prose that we possess. For it undoubtedly exhibits a vigorous mind conscious of strong powers, a robust personality visibly struggling towards an arena wider and better suited for the exercise of these powers than the narrow sphere in which Fate had placed him, and a spirit that is fearlessly, almost defiantly, independent, yet free from that overweening pride which repels and provokes hostility. It contains, moreover, many characteristic touches that are suggestive of the fluency, precision, and originality of language which gave a

charm and distinction to his conversation in later days. Such happy phrases as "the glorious dawnings of poor, unfortunate Fergusson," and "my highest pulse of vanity," and "kindling at the flame of the elder poets," show a certain rectitude of critical judgment combined with the ambition of a master of style. They also show the modesty of one who, though avowedly "a rhymers from his earliest years," and fully persuaded of his own gifts, neither hoped, when he selected rural themes for poetic treatment, to outshine Theocritus and Virgil, nor scorned to borrow light from the inextinguishable torch of native singers like Dunbar and Ramsay. And in this expression of natural feeling by which he anticipates and seeks to disarm all supercilious criticism we have an admirable example of the high-hearted independence, the unflinching candour, and unaffected sincerity of personal conviction which distinguished him through life as man and poet:—"If any critic catches at the word 'genius,' the author tells him, once for all, that he certainly looks upon himself as possessed of some." As a whole, however, this preface of 1786 is written in a careless, rough-and-ready style, and is altogether inferior to the Dedication to the Caledonian Hunt of the following year, which is remarkable in every way—poetical in its imagery, natural in its sentiment, dignified and tactful in its appeal, and bold yet just in its assumptions. In this composition Burns, it is true, by his frequent personification of abstract qualities and conditions

shows marked traces of eighteenth-century convention. But it abounds with singularly felicitous touches. Every line has distinction, and every line is in its place. Where, he asks, should I look "so properly for patronage as to the illustrious names of my native land, those who bear the honours and inherit the virtues of their ancestors. I come to claim the common Scottish name with you, my illustrious countrymen, and to tell the world that I glory in the title." In the first Preface he says that "he sings the sentiments and manners he felt and saw in himself and his rustic compeers around him, in his and their native language." And then he declares that the motive he had in courting the Muses, the object he had in transcribing "the various feelings, the loves, the griefs, the hopes, the fears, in his own breast," was "to find some kind of counterpoise to the struggles of a world, always an alien scene, a task uncouth to the poetical mind." In the Dedication of the second volume, again, he says, "The Poetic Genius of my country found me as the prophetic bard Elijah did Elisha—at the plough; and threw her inspiring mantle over me. She bade me sing the love, the joys, the moral scenes and moral pleasures of my natal soil, in my native tongue; I tuned my wild, artless notes, as she inspired." And then he adds, "She whispered me to come to this ancient metropolis of Caledonia, and lay my songs under your honoured protection: I now obey her dictates."

Now these documents are not only self-delineative and self-defining, but, read with *The Vision*,—a poem that displays, quite as much as *Tam o' Shanter*, though in a different way, Burns's distinct and special poetic faculty of "bodying forth the forms of things unknown," and turning meanings and feelings into visual and representative phantasies,—they irresistibly suggest the leading motives which pervade his art. The themes of his poetry are Nature, Love of Country, and Human Life. And what first offers itself for criticism, therefore, is the fact that in the art of Burns we have displayed a genius local and spontaneously popular, national in tone and character; and—as we saw in the second division of my book—thoroughly representative of the century in which it sprang to power. As the leading spirit of the new era of Scottish literature and Scottish life he presents himself for judgment under three aspects—the Poet of the Country; the Poet of the Nation; the Poet of Humanity.

#### IV.

CONFINED within the strictest chronological limits the period embraced by the poetical life of Burns does not exceed twelve years. And there are two eras into which it naturally divides itself. The first is the Mossgiel and Edinburgh period, extending from March 1784 to June 1788. And the second is the Ellisland and Dumfries period, extending from 13th

June 1788 to 21st July 1796. The former is generally and justly regarded as the blossoming-time of Burns's genius. Having found out the true bent of his genius he worked during these years as a master-craftsman. He had undisturbed possession of his own individuality and full command over the materials and resources of his art. Such satirical productions as *The Holy Fair* and *Death and Dr Hornbook*; or the characteristic *Epistles* to rhyme-composing neighbours in Ayrshire, or poems like *Halloween* and *A Winter Night*, the *Address to the Deil*, *The Earnest Cry* and *Scotch Drink* have a fulness of life and a richness of imagery, a sense of joyousness and power that betray the poet's exultant absorption and conscious triumph in his chosen work. And *The Vision*, *The Twa Dogs*, *The Cottar's Saturday Night* and *The Jolly Beggars*, not only evince the ease and delight of an exuberant mind realising its own strength in matured creations, but an intimate acquaintance with all those artistic materials best fitted for the full development of his genius which existed in the literature of a previous age. With the single exception of *Tam o' Shanter*—"since Bruce fought Bannockburn," as Alexander Smith said, "the best single day's work done in Scotland"—we have no poem of extended plan produced during the latter period that can compare with any of the poems last mentioned. But the period is marked by an unparalleled profusion of the most perfect lyrics: by that marvellous series of songs, new and old,

original and improved, which he contributed to the musical collections of Johnson and Thomson. The Burns of this second period is simply the Burns of the first, only in a more crystallized form. And therefore in spite of the narrow chronological limitations indicated above, no true boundary line can be drawn between them.

It would be easy perhaps to make a classification of the poems that fall within these two periods. One might attempt some such classification as this which would at least prove how various were the styles and subjects he essayed :—

1. Lyric Poems : Amatory or Love Poems.
2. Epistolary Poems.
3. Narrative Poems or Tales.
4. Comic or Humorous Poems.
5. Satirical or Vituperative Poems.
6. Epigrammatical Poems.
7. Political Ballads and Pasquinades.
8. Moral and Religious Poems.
9. Elegiac Poems.
10. Eclogues or Pastoral Poems.

But it is neither necessary nor desirable to do this. For practically Burns's work is one group ; varied in form and subject, but remarkably uniform in spirit and in style. It moves in obedience to one underworking spirit that regulates and determines each portion of the whole. And although for purposes of illustration, a critic might conveniently divide and subdivide it,



the division effected would inevitably be more or less arbitrary and fanciful, and even tend in some respects to be actually misleading. For in the work produced during these twelve prolific years the poetic faculty shows itself full grown. The strange exuberance, the almost tropical overgrowth of Burns's sudden and shortlived maturity, forms indeed one of the most remarkable facts in literary history. It is not merely certain well-defined steps of progressive development that the critic has to deal with here, but a growth of poetry that appeared complete in stem and foliage, in flower and fruit, in a space of time almost unparalleled for brevity. And it not only shot up with extraordinary force and exuberant fertility, but it blossomed to the very last in fullest perfection. Poets, according to Shelley, are like chameleons—they take the colour of the plants on which they feed. And, of course, Burns naturally adopted the forms and broke into the style of Ramsay and Fergusson who first roused his muse into emulative vigour. But by no means so slavishly as his laudatory poems and prose panegyrics, given above, would have led one to expect. His verse takes the colour of that on which his intellect nourished itself. The diction and outward form of his poems are similar to those of his precursors. A comparison of his work with theirs discovers, as we have already seen, many striking points of resemblance in thought and manner. We can even trace in his poems and songs the gradual

growth of his taste through experiment and failure to that assured self-confidence which indicates that he had not only discovered the true bent and bias of his genius but attained to a complete mastery of the means and methods of his craft. But we cannot trace in the brief but productive career of Burns evidence of successive manners as we can in the case of a painter like Raphael or a sculptor like Angelo, or successive moods as we can in the case of a poet like Shakespeare or a musician like Mozart. And, even if we could do this, the result attained would be eminently unsatisfactory, if indeed it would not be altogether neutralized by the simple fact that Burns's artistic career was infinitely shorter than that of any one of those named—with the single exception of Raphael who died at thirty-eight; and that changes which in their case imply different steps in the progressive development of a genius, mean the whole course of a life in his. In a quite exceptional sense Burns's work is himself. And the life and its artistic outcome alike defy strict systematic treatment, and even seem to contradict well-grounded generalisations. The most that can be safely predicated is that his poetic genius was always in advance of his general growth, but it was never subject to any other law than that of his own passionate nature. And this indeed is the central fact of the case. His productions do not require any elaborate analysis of their contents. Nor is there any need at this time of day to dilate on their merits.

Their meaning is obvious, and their charm is universally acknowledged. I have already attempted to show the compass and limits of his genius, and endeavoured to fix his relation to the Scottish poets who preceded him. And it only remains for me to bring the sense of this real continuity of art and life into greater prominence.

## V.

BURNS then is essentially the poet of the country. A son of the soil more truly than any other singer, his metaphors and images were always drawn fresh from the soil. A dweller in fields and farms for two-and-thirty years, the whole strength and inspiration of his poetry were drawn from rural sources and the robust open-air life that he lived. In every line that he wrote one can trace the effects of that solitary communion with Nature early indulged in, which is so conducive to strong thoughts and true feelings, and seldom fails to produce a sanitary and sweetening influence upon character. During his growing years a wide circle of country life was open to him. Nothing indeed lay between him and the stimulating presence of the mighty mother. Nature was not far off, but close at hand wherever he turned his eyes or steps. With fresh senses and eager feeling, with open mind and observant eye, he went the whole picturesque round

of the seasons. He marked every minute detail of change in the circling year. He hung with delight over the lowly flowers of the field, the scarlet hips and budding woodbines by the wayside, the seeding pines that stood in serried clumps in those high plantations by which he roamed in cloudy winter days and breezy blue-skied noons of May; and listened, as himself says, with strange "devotion of soul," to the loud solitary whistle of the curlew in the summer morning or the wild rustling cadence of some troop of grey plover that winged their way through the early dusklight of the autumn day. Nothing escaped his sure eye for the picturesque. And everything it fixed upon was indelibly imprinted upon his heart and brain. Hence the apt and vivid references to the scenes of his native country, the intense and penetrating glances at the most vital aspects and minutest beauties of nature with which his poems abound. As the result of intimate knowledge and enjoyment they often seem to reveal in a moment and by a single touch all the charm and loveliness of the sights and sounds that thrilled his senses. Everything grows fresh under his hand; and the symbolism of nature which he employs in the utterance of his thoughts is always fresh, direct, and singularly unlike anything to be found in the poetry of his precursors. They give us fine pictures of rural life; he gives us the very things themselves. They supply us with mere musical reproductions of

natural forces ; we walk amongst his sights and sounds and partake of the pleasurable emotions which they excited in him. And we have continually the smell of corn-rigs and newly turned earth, the fragrance of flowering hedgerows and new-made haycocks, whilst the perfume of the blossoming hawthorn and the wild-brier rose mingles with the scent of bucht and byre and the breath of steaming kine—all diffused like straying winds through his poetry which has therefore a pervading wholesomeness like the brisk morning air, an invigorating quality like the breath of “uncontaminate springtide,” that soothes and refreshes us, and revives the unworn sentiment of a world that is ever young.

Burns, like the rest of us, ate and slept under a roof. But, as has been pointed out, the majority of the four-and-twenty hours were met in the open\* : on the swart moors or heathered hillsides, in the furrowed field or woodland wild, in ilka green shaw and by the murmuring streams of Kyle and Nithsdale. There he found his favourite flowers—the rough bur-thistle, the daisy and the snowdrop, the primrose and the wild violet ; and the furred and feathered objects of his tenderest regard—the mouse and the maukin, the “birring paitricks” and the “cootie muircocks” and the laverock that springs “frae the

\* See a useful and suggestive article on the topics here discussed in the *Scotsman* of January 23, 1890 ; also Veitch *ut supra*, Vol. ii., chap. xvi.

dew o' the lawn." Like Dante and Shakespeare and Wordsworth he was one of those poets who went by "the great clock of the firmament," or took as his timekeeper the merry lark which

'Tween light and dark,  
Blythe waukens by the daisy's side.

He dates his poetical epistles not in prosaic almanac fashion, but by signs and symbols that mark with patient delicacy of touch the stately revolutions of the seasons. Who would prefer the plain time of dated day or named month to this pretty way of reckoning?—

While briers and woodbines budding green,  
An' patricks scraichin' loud at e'en,  
An' morning poussie whiddin' seen,  
Inspire my muse ;

or this—

While new-ca'd kye rowte at the stake,  
An' pownies reek in pleugh or braik ;

or this—

While at the stook the shearers cow'r  
To shun the bitter blaudin' show'r.

It is in this delightfully novel manner that Burns commences those gossipy epistles in which he prattles inadvertently away and all the while lets fall at every other word some pearly conceit of humour or of fancy to charm the reader. Such indications of poetic susceptibility of impression, made spontaneously in familiar writings not primarily designed for publication,

are to be found only in the confidential outpourings of the greatest of poets who studied and practised their poetry like Burns and Wordsworth in the fields or among the lonely hills. With his truly lyrical genius Burns breathes life into the rigid formulæ of the clerkly mind and makes them pliant to his more poetic and more passionate feeling. These deft picturings, so naturally and so vividly picturesque, make Time itself more noble and give a new grace and charm to those simple incidents of rustic life by which the poet measured it. Burns's best work was not only done in the country but in the open air : witness as characteristic specimens of his out-of-doors genius the Bannockburn ode, *Tam o' Shanter*, the address to *Mary in Heaven*, the *Death and Dying Words of poor Mailie* ; and hence there is in all his writings a vernal property of which no other Scottish poet from Dunbar to Thomson had ever found the secret. Till his advent at least we had no poet who possessed in the same degree the original gift of spreading the tone and atmosphere of the ideal world around the forms, incidents and situations of rural life.

## VI.

FROM the era of Burns Scottish poetry in its relation to the world of outward nature has three obvious characteristics. There is (1) fervent love for free wild nature and the objects that fill up the landscape—trees

and flowers, haughs and hills and streams; (2) an imaginative sympathy for the grand and powerful—mountain heights, foaming floods, dark wind-swept woods; and there is (3) an ever-increasing tendency to indulge in elaborate description, in full and minute word-painting, more or less faithful.\* In the poetry of Burns we discover the germs of that intense feeling for natural beauty and grandeur which now exists in almost every department of our literature. From him our poetry grew to that free, full love of outward nature which marks the work of Wordsworth and Scott. None of these out-distance Burns, however, in sense-energy, in strong, free open-air nature-feeling, in accurate and minute observation; all quickened and nourished by fervent love and vividly revealed in images, ideas, and conceptions that never fail of completeness. As regards pure æsthetical feeling, truthfulness of vision, direct face-to-face communion with sensible things, he is literally unsurpassed. He satisfies the highest end of descriptive art—complete unity of impression; and if you analyse his delineations of outward objects and scenes you will find that they exemplify all the best and highest laws of that art. It is hard now-a-days to have to quote Burns whose best descriptions are, or should be, on every schoolboy's lips. But I must, for the sake of what follows, give one or two examples of his graphic power. As an

\* See Veitch *ut supra* i. p. 6. Cf. Shairp *Poetic Interpretation of Nature* p. 223.



example of his fine eye-perception take then this couplet in which he pictures moonlight water undergoing an ice-change :—

The chilly frost beneath the silver beam,  
Crept, gently crusting, ower the glittering stream.

Take again as an example of pure and transparent nature-feeling this picturesque description of the burn in *Halloween* :—

Whyles ower a linn the burnie plays,  
As through the glen it wimpl't ;  
Whyles round a rocky scaur it strays,  
Whyles in a wiel it dimpl't ;  
Whyles glitter'd to the nightly rays,  
Wi' bickerin' dancin' dazzle ;  
Whyles cookit underneath the braes,  
Below the spreading hazel,  
Unseen that night.

Or these lines in *The Brigs of Ayr* descriptive of a thaw and river-spate which probably show Burns's power of direct picturing at its highest and best :—

When heavy, dark, continued, a'-day rains  
Wi' deepening deluges o'erflow the plains ;  
When from the hills where springs the brawling Coil,  
Or stately Lugar's mossy fountains boil,  
Or where the Greenock winds his moorland course,  
Or haunted Garpal draws his feeble source,  
Arous'd by blust'ring winds and spotting thowes,  
In mony a torrent down his snaw-broo rowes ;  
While crashing ice, borne on the roaring spate,  
Sweeps dams, an' mills, an' brigs, a' to the gate ;  
And from Glenbuck, down to the Ratton-Key,

Auld Ayr is just one lengthen'd, tumbling sea ;  
 Then down ye'll hurl, deil nor ye never rise !  
 And dash the gumlie jaups up to the pouring skies.

And if the perfection of descriptive art be the presence of the real, surely we have it in his *Winter Night* in which we get not only the details of the snow-storm as they were seen and felt, but certain thoughts, pithily expressed, as if under the open sky, that reveal the deep underworkings of the heart as well as the singular watchfulness of the poet's eye for the minute fact and silent processes of nature ; a mingling, in other words, of the outward and inward, of soul and sense, which is peculiarly characteristic of Burns's descriptions :—

When biting Boreas, fell and doure,  
 Sharp shivers thro' the leafless bow'r,  
 And Phœbus gies a short-liv'd glow'r  
     Far south the lift,  
 Dim-dark'ning thro' the flaky show'r  
     Or whirling drift :

Ae night the storm the steeples rock'd,  
 Poor labour sweet in sleep was lock'd,  
 While burns wi' snawy wreaths up-chok'd,  
     Wild-eddying swirl,  
 Or thro' the mining outlet bocked,  
     Down headlong hurl.

## VII.

BURNS then shows a varied and intense susceptibility to all that is beautiful and awe-inspiring in

the external world. His heart, as Carlyle said, "flows out in sympathy with universal nature, and in her bleakest provinces discerns a beauty and a meaning." He even shows at times—especially in the exquisite and impressive *Lament on Captain Henderson*,—a singular intensity of nature-feeling, an intimate consciousness of the expression of natural things, which it would be hard to parallel outside of Milton's *Lycidas* or Shelley's *Adonais*. Here the harebells and roses that bloom in the "haz'ly shaws and briery dens," and the craiks and curlews that call through a cloud or cry from the flowering clover, have inexplicable affinities and strange delicacies of intercourse, and even possess, according to the poet, a kind of moral and spiritual life which makes them capable of sympathy and companionship with man, so that he calls upon them one and all to join his "wailing numbers." In every stanza the word and the idea are united with absolute justice; and as a whole this noble poem may be said to furnish not only one of the most convincing proofs of Burns's highly sensitive apprehension of the deeper and more thrilling aspects of external nature, but one of the best possible examples of that sort of impassioned contemplation on the condition of nature and humanity in which he occasionally indulges. And this leads me to say that he seldom describes nature merely for the sake of intellectual picturing which, as a rule, has hardly

anything of the true painter's spirit in it. We continually find in his poems and songs intimations of the presence of a soul that is capable of a deep interest in the minute beauties of free wild nature, or an impassioned love of the sterner and more powerful impersonal forces of the outward world. In illustration of this it is only necessary to refer to *The Daisy* and *Halloween*, to *A Winter Night* and the *Elegy* just commented on, in all of which he poetises the thoughts and sentiments contained in the well-known letter to Mrs Dunlop of 1st January 1789. And although it is impossible to say that in dealing with Nature he was a catholic poet, as Shakespeare was, or rose to its impassioned analogies with man, as Wordsworth did, or apprehended its deep symbolism in the way that Coleridge did, or ever thought of lending a soul to material nature as Shelley did habitually, it is still certain that Burns was essentially a pious and reverential worshipper of the outward world as the manifestation of a supreme and beneficent Power which lay within it and beyond, and that it was through the sterner and fiercer aspects of nature that he most clearly perceived the workings of this Power. In a sense the severe and sublime phenomena, rather than the soft and placid, were those to which he most readily yielded himself. True, "the power of hills" was never on him as it was on Byron and Scott. For, though born and brought up within sight of the

domed and wooded mountains of Arran, though he could see any day from Mount Oliphant or the heights above Mauchline the sombre Alpine buttresses of Goatfell rising up sharply out of the purple shadows, he never once mentions them in his letters or poems. The glory and grandeur of mountain scenery had no inspiring influence for him. But he appreciated "the mighty tempest and the hoary waste" and all the forms of winter energy and winter storm, and especially delighted, as himself says, to hear the "wind howling among the trees and roving over the plain." And in proof of this a score of his poems might be cited.\*

Pretty passages of pure description subtly intruded for mere effect, however,—elaborate word-pictures of visual objects such as we find on every page of Thomson and Shenstone, of Shelley and Keats,—are extremely rare in Burns. This is the kind of composition in which he does not excel. He was endowed with a creative pictorial imagination. And it is characteristic of him that he invariably pictures by power of epithet,—by sudden fervours of phrase. A single line sets in motion a train of thought. A happily chosen word brings before us with all the vivid charm of real presence the visual objects that fill up a wide landscape. He gives us trees and grass and flowers—the simple beauties of nature in abundance; but, as a rule, it is more by suggestion than cumulation that he

\* See Veitch *ut supra* ii., pp. 122-141.

produces his greatest effects. Burns has the great artist's charm of indirectness. And, besides, he never confounds nature with mere vegetation as Ramsay is so apt to do, or makes mere poetical inventories of nature's pageantries as Thomson does. And if his imagination exercises itself on banks and braes, on individual herbs and flowers, he does not commit the error, so common to poets like Darwin, of mistaking what may be termed botanical circumstance for physical nature in the truest sense. He does not neglect the larger forms and aspects of the visible world, or overlook in his affection for the minutiae of vegetation—be it thistles or daisies, hoary hawthorns or budding birches—the wider modifications and deeper processes of those great natural elements by which profound impressions are made on the imagination. And it is one of the greatest triumphs of his simple art that whilst thus treating of nature, broadly yet minutely, he so fuses thought and word indissolubly together in line-long flashes of imaginative flame, and harmonises the deeper instincts and emotions of the human heart with those things which furnish the objective occasion of his verse, that certain passages strike us with all the freshness of reawakened nature, or with the strange interest of half-forgotten things exhumed from nameless graves after centuries of burial. Each object that he touches has a tendency to elicit into consciousness whenever we behold it the primary emotion with which the poet himself associated it. His poems, in other words, excite

in us that mysterious and unfathomable feeling of sympathy with inanimate nature which suddenly rises in the mind at certain seasons to which Tennyson gives a beautiful embodiment in his immortal lyric of *Tears, idle tears*.

In the poetry of Burns localities, natural phenomena, incidents, and individualities—all human thoughts and feelings, and all impressions of the sense-world—are fused in some overawing or pathetic emotion, and usually one of an intensely personal kind. Is it the banks and braes of Doon? Or the warbling bird that there “wanton through the flowering thorn?” Then these excite a feeling of pained surprise in the bosom of his love-lorn songstress that *they* “can bloom sae fresh and fair” whilst *she* remains “sae weary fu’ o’ care”; and the happy-hearted chirring of the “little birds” only recalls the bitter memories of a sorrow-laden past:—

Thou minds me o’ departed joys,  
Departed—never to return.

Or is it the wintry wind? Then

The tempest’s howl, it sooths my soul,  
My griefs it seems to join;  
The leafless trees my fancy please,  
Their fate resembles mine!

Or is it the Mouse? Then the “sleekit, cow’rin’,  
tim’rous beastie” ruthlessly evicted from “house or

hald" by the "cruel coulter" and doomed "to thole the winter's sleety dribble, an' cranreuch cauld" instantly suggests a comparison between the fate and fortunes of the suffering Mousie and the luckless poet who innocently caused it, much to the advantage of the former :—

Still thou art blest, compar'd wi' me !  
 The present only toucheth thee :  
 But, och ! I backward cast my e'e  
                                   On prospects drear !  
 An' forward, tho' I canna see,  
                                   I guess an' fear !

Or is it the Daisy? Then the flower touches some pulse of feeling in his sensitive nature, and becomes to him the symbol of a stern personal truth. The ultimate object of these verses of smarting pains and touching plaints is not poetical description, but to point to the insignificance of man in the grasp of remorseless Destiny, or to inculcate the wisdom of prudence and good conduct. The flower of the field is only a pathetic emblem of the ill-starred doom-stricken poet himself, upturned by "Ruin's ploughshare" and crushed beneath "the furrow's weight" of a hard and pitiless world. He uses it chiefly as a means of expressing the dominant sentiment of the hour—the human love of "artless maid" and the human woe of "simple bard." In short Burns uses visual objects and cosmical processes simply, or mainly, as means of expressing the



moods of the human mind. This is strikingly exemplified in *Afton Water* and *The Birks of Aberfeldy*, where the personal feeling inwrought with the living powers of nature are in perfect harmony with the object and appropriate to the theme in hand. With him poetry is a vehicle of personal emotion. He impregnates nature and natural scenery with the joys and sorrows of the individual soul; and appeals to the feeling and imagination, not to the judgment and understanding. Of this we have typical examples in the *Lament of Mary, Queen of Scots, on the Approach of Spring*, in the love songs of *Ye Banks and Braes* and *Mary in Heaven*, and in these characteristic lines from the poem called *Menie* :—

In vain to me the cowslips blaw,  
 In vain to me the violets spring ;  
 In vain to me, in glen or shaw,  
 The mavis and the lintwhite sing.

\* \* \* \*

The wanton coot the water skims,  
 Among the reeds the ducklings cry,  
 The stately swan majestic swims,  
 And everything is bless'd but I.

\* \* \* \*

Come, winter, with thine angry howl,  
 And raging bend the naked tree ;  
 Thy gloom will soothe my cheerless soul,  
 When nature all is sad like me.

No poet has more faithfully represented that terrible contrast, known more or less to us all, between human hopelessness and Nature's joy. And in the new and individual way in which Burns regards Nature there is something that closely identifies him with the deistic theology of his age. The recognised majesty of the universe teaches him, in other words, as it taught Leibnitz and Pope, the indifference of the gods and the misery of men. It has been well said that "impersonality in art really means mediocrity. If you have nothing to tell about yourself, or if courage be lacking in you to tell the truth, you are not an artist."\* If the personal accent distinguishes the master, then Burns is a supreme artist. He preaches from the text of his own experience, as Wordsworth said. There is nothing mediocre in his poetry—if we set aside his English verses which, with the single exception of the lyric *To Mary in Heaven*, are vapid and wordy—because he has much to tell about himself, and tells it frankly and fearlessly; even *against* himself, for since the Psalmist's day no flagrant sinner of sovereign song-gift has so fully, so frankly, so sweetly confessed his sins and shortcomings. This is the charm with which he dominates in all tongues. Even under the disenchantment of translation Goethe recognises the power of his personal influence and the absolute truthfulness of his vision, and Taine acknowledges the unaffected candour of his tone and the

\* See George Moore *Modern Painting*, 1893, p. 226.

Homeric fidelity of his touch. Broadly speaking Burns was the first of our Scottish bards who really loved external nature as the source of conscious emotion of a pleasurable or painful kind. That is one of his distinctive merits as a poet of the country. But there is another. He sees nature full of sentiment and excitement; and men and women, as parts of it, strangely grouped and connected with its beauty and grandeur. His poetic descriptions have always some stir of life, some passionate or pathetic elements of familiar human experience in them. He never paints an empty background with no moving object or incident to relieve or animate the scene, to touch the heart or inflame the imagination. In this respect he prepared the way for Wordsworth and Scott. The extraordinary revolution of sentiment in modern literature, the deepening and quickening of human thought and action, the higher social destiny since reached, are largely due to Burns's deep strong realistic revelations of rustic life; to those bursts of song that show us the sweet countryside with its woods and streams, its silent ministries of nature, and all the "happy living things" which the poet loved with the warmth and godlike charity of a heart whose inmost doors lay open "toward the sun-rising" ready to receive and succour everything that lived.

## VIII.

FROM what I have said it will be rightly inferred

that Burns's references to the aspects of nature are, as a rule, incidental. We have scattered through his poems and songs many lovely little sceneries and delicious glimpses of Lowland landscape. They are singularly rich in vivid open-air effects, but the central point of their spiritual import is man as man. Mere scenic loveliness has comparatively little interest for him. What touches him most closely is not the natural, but the *moral* picturesque. He was an enthusiastic admirer of natural scenery. But the chief charm of a landscape always lay in its connection with rural labour and rustic life. The knowes and meadows of Mossgiel and Ellisland with their lovely sunrises and dreamy twilights were dear to him, yet of less account after all than the living souls who flitted through the shine and shadow from day to day and thrilled with mingled awe and tenderness the romantic chords of his heart. In Edinburgh he loved to walk with Nasmyth the painter to Arthur's Seat to see the sun rise from the sea and flood with golden streams of light the wooded lands and low-browed townlets of Fife, or with Dugald Stewart to the Braid Hills and towards the Pentlands that he might behold the domed and steepled city stirring into life in the early morn. But it was the people, not the Arcadian scenery in the midst of which they lived, on whom his mind was fixed by night or day: the Castle, rather than the rock which lifts it so picturesquely skywards; the forsaken seat of "Legisla-

tion's sovereign powers," rather than the romantic hill on which it stood; ancient Holyrood, rather than the green slopes and beetling crags in whose shadow it lay; the smoke-wreathed houses of the Old Town that towered tier above tier from Palace to Citadel, rather than the yet existing Nor' Loch which cast back in many a shivered reflection the lights and cressets from their lofty casements in the clear winter nights of 1786. When in Kyle or Nithsdale "poetry, to him, lay in the cottage rather than in the tree that overshadowed it, or the stream that sparkled past it." \* And in Edinburgh, as himself confessed to Professor Stewart, the sight of smoking cottages was the sight admired above all others in the landscape that stretched out before him, because he had witnessed "the happiness and worth which they contained." In all his work, therefore, the love of nature is rigorously subordinated to his sympathy with human life; and all common things—dawn, noon, and night,—are to him full of sentiment, of human or personal expression. The shows and forces and processes of nature are incorporated with some phase of strong emotion: translated to a higher or sweeter service than mere poetic description—subordinated, in short, to the central human interest of his song. The wastlin wind blew rude and chill, and the day's darg had been hard and heavy. But it was then that he "went owre the hills to Nannie." He gives

\* See Alexander Smith *Memoir of Burns* p. xxxviii.

us a picture, simply tender as any drawing of upland fell or moonlit moor by Corot or Courbet, of a Lammas night when

The sky was blue, the wind was still,  
The moon was shining clearly,

only that he may tell us of the happy hours he spent with Annie among "the rigs o' barley." And observe how the human impulses of his tender heart always get above the sweet enticements of inanimate nature. On a clear evening when "thick flies the skimming swallow," he invites his "charmer" to stray with him upon his "gladsome way" to see the beauty of nature :—

The rustling corn, the fruited thorn,  
And every happy creature.

Here we have the voice of nature : the one touch that makes the whole world kin. Almost in the literal sense Burns kissed his mother Earth from birth. And he was never really weaned from her. From the outset to the end he lived face to face with the emotions he described and the experiences he sang. He could seize from the inner side by links of vital affinity every form and type of character—from the fashionables of the Scottish capital to the field-workers who roamed over the pleasant holms and broomy banks of Ayr and Nith ; but the humblest aspects of life, which

had points of contact with his own, were those which he specially delighted to ponder and pourtray. He knew at first sight what Wordsworth calls the "essential passions" of human nature: the elementary ideas and universal traits of life and character which form the staple of all great art—love and hate, jealousy, despondency, hypocrisy, conviviality, and despair. His descriptions of external scenes were taken direct from Nature. His delineations of human life were inspired by the actual experiences of the Lowland peasantry amongst whom he lived. Pre-eminently the poet of poor working humanity in rural places, his lyrics came straight from the heart, and voiced the joys, the fears, the hopes of the lowly sons of toil whose station was ennobled and whose burdens were lightened because he had shared and sung them.\* Fresh and direct, they were also intensely personal and intensely human.

## IX.

BURNS'S poetry, which shows to the full the poetic possibilities of the speech of common life and of the poor, was not only a powerful but a conscious and systematic appeal to that deep truth and reality of nature and of life which had secretly been gathering way since Ramsay's death. He was plainly sent into

\* See Shairp's *Burns* p. 196.

the world to be part of its motive power. Nothing took him by surprise. He was ready for every emergency, and always at his ease whatever he was dealing with, whether it was a mouse or a daisy, a peasant, a prince, or an Auld Licht cleric. And he always said the right thing in the right way, whether he was talking to Death or his dogs, to a dairymaid or the Devil, whom he chaffed as devil was never chaffed before, reducing him with mathematical precision "to a *point*, which has position but no magnitude"—to an abstraction or figment of Calvinistic orthodoxy which sought to fetter the poet's liberal play of thought. Prior to his advent Scottish poetry was local, or at best national. Clothed in a dialect familiar to the people, it was of course popular. But it was restricted in its aims and interests, narrow in its range, limited in its appeal. In Ramsay and his collaborators we discover the provincial note of limitation. Before Burns this was the dominant note. His forerunners were men of vivid, but not wide imagination. They sang of "the griefs and joys that weave the web of human time"; and even touched the fringe of those greater questions to which Burns gave such vigorous expression in his attempt to destroy the strait puritanical garment with which the Church had clothed the life of Scotland. But their outlook on the world was not wide like his. Poetry, even in Ramsay's hands, suffered greatly from the too visible decay of national feeling. It had only faint glimpses



of the wider horizon that was gradually opening out for humanity, of the brighter and nobler dawn into which the world was slowly revolving. Burns foresaw that day ; his genius rose up to meet it ;

And a whirlwind of music came sweet from the spheres.

The creative imagination of the new singer communicated to whatever it touched a certain character of infinitude. It added, in other words, a universal note to Scottish poetry. This, of course, was not altogether the gift of Burns to his time. It was in a singular degree the gift of his age to Burns. For, as I endeavoured to show in the second chapter of my book, the ideas of freedom and fraternity, the sentiment of universal brotherhood, and all the elements that are included in what we now call "the enthusiasm of humanity," were breaking upon the minds of men like a fresh revelation in the latter half of the eighteenth century. Nevertheless every form of experience, every type of human character, every idea and sentiment that expressed the essential oneness of human nature, had an attraction for him which they never possessed to any other Scottish poet. His style was larger than Ramsay's, more rooted in the earth than Fergusson's, more vivid with the impulse of nature than that of any of his precursors. He saw not only those deeper elements of rapture and anguish that are unperceived by ordinary

eyes, as in that immortal quatrain in the *Farewell to Nancy* which Scott said contained "the essence of a thousand love-tales," and Byron adopted as a motto for *The Bride of Abydos* :—

Had we never lov'd sae kindly,  
Had we never lov'd sae blindly,  
Never met—or never parted,  
We had ne'er been broken hearted ;

but the picturesque, the humorous, the pathetic varieties of the common lot—life with all its passions and humanity, with all its powers and consequences, —as is abundantly proved by that priceless legacy of three hundred songs which he bequeathed to the world, and which, for this very reason, forms the pride and glory and consolation not merely of Scotsmen but of all the world's races in spite of dialect, local colour, and national tone. Burns saw around him, looked both before and after, and touched humanity at every point. Is it the weird world of dreams, the shadowy borderland from which the brooding spirit receives strange monitory reflections of real life? You have it presented with imaginative vividness in *Tam o' Shanter* in which there is a grotesque materialising of visionary abstractions that suggests the scholastic realism of the Middle Age as represented in the poetry of Dante and Dunbar. Is it the free play of savage life, the wild abandonment of rugged and roving penury,

the joyous dare-devil junketing of brawlers and gipsies? You have it in the fantastic "splore" of *The Jolly Beggars*, in which one finds a beauty born of unlikely elements, a charm wrung out of squalid and terrible things, a heart-moving power that comes nearer, it seems to me, the spirit of Chaucer in *The Wife of Bath* than the spirit of Béranger in the immortal *Gueux*, with which this cantata has so often been compared. Is it the dignity and beauty, the simple incurious faith of peasant life? You have it in that sincerest of virtuous idylls *The Cottar's Saturday Night* — the most influential, through probably the most imitative, of Burns's productions, for it not only shows the influence of Gray, but has echoes of Pope and Thomson and Goldsmith, and even of Milton. Is it scorn of hypocrisy? You have it in *Holy Willie's Prayer*. Or the comic incongruities of country courtship? You have it in the arch masterpiece of *Duncan Gray*. Or the passion and pathos of love and separation? You have them in *Mary in Heaven* and *My Nannie's awa*. Or the invincible fidelity of disinterested friendship? You have it in the immortal hymn of *Auld Lang Syne*. To Burns's absolute sincerity and indisputable truth must be added, therefore, a remarkable facility of impression of the problems of life. His songs respond to all the throbbing activities of human existence, and all the varied movements in the complex web of nature.

## X.

AND this leads me to say that no poet ever lived who lifted the true patriotic fervour of his countrymen to a holier height. Where do you find a poem of his that does not thrill with a fervid, even perfervid, love of country, or one that does not strive to reunite or strengthen the broken or enfeebled bonds of human brotherhood? All the materials of his art, all the attributes of his many-sided nature—scenes, characters, incidents; the pathos, piety, and passion of his inmost soul—are subordinated to, and poured out in furtherance of, these high and noble aims. After the depression and discouragement of the seventeenth century, it was his special mission to quicken the pulse of the nation's life and revive the starved flame of patriotism. He not only interpreted the life of the Scottish peasantry and purified and ennobled Scottish song; but restored the nationality of Scotland, revived the traditional glories of his race, and preserved as classic for all time the Doric tongue which, but for him, would have been doomed like other dialects to obscurity. National feeling was deep, warm, and unquenchable it is true; but it had been smothered or made effectless by injurious prejudices and the Englishing of popular literature before his fiery and luminous advent. Burns came to raise it out of its embers; to recreate and nourish it. And no national epic could have been so potent in the formation of a noble consciousness of the greatness of his country's

past, the splendour of its destiny, the individual duty that lay to each man's hand, than his imperishable songs which touched all ages and appealed to all ranks. The coldest kindled at the sound of *Scots wha hae*, whose verses still clash like swords upon bucklers and seem to have the strength of the tread of armies in them; or *Does hautghy Gaul invasion threat?* which, though set in a lower key, was yet able to move the pulse of the people to a charge, and forms indeed to this hour a rallying-point of patriotism; or the simply tender lyric *Their groves o' sweet myrtles let foreign lands reckon*—dedicated to Freedom and Bonny Jean—in which he described the land of Caledonia as consecrated ground in which tyranny and slavery could take no root. And no creed or liturgy has done more to foster and further the Christian doctrine of the oneness of human nature than those lyric litanies of mutual love and moral helpfulness which rippled in one continuous stream from the full and flowing heart of Burns. The telling strains of *A man's a man for a' that*, in which he summed up the highest and most universal form of democracy, the inimitable protest of the suffering poor in the tale of *The Twa Dogs*, in which he showed himself the shrewdest of philosophers and the profoundest of moralists, and the dirge of *Man was made to mourn*, in which with one flash of deep-probing and illuminating wisdom he laid bare forever the real cause of the world's inequalities and the aimless sufferings that they entail—these poems bred virtue, inculcated

forbearance, and inflamed the most selfish soul to emulation in those works of Charity, of Order, and of Love by which alone the race is to be transformed from savageness to manhood, and the world "redeemed from despairing into peace." And hence, after all, it is the glowing all-embracing humanity of Burns's soul,—so full, as Carlyle said, "of inborn riches, of love to all living and lifeless things"—that forms the salient characteristic, the animating motive, of his poetry. His naturalism is interwoven with his nationalism; and his patriotism broadens out into a universal love of all mankind. Britain has not seen since Shakespeare's day a more eclectic humanitarian, or a more cosmopolitan poet. In the history of European literature it would be hard to find a man indeed of more finely tempered nature—more stalwart and sincere, more kindly and unswervingly true, or one more capable of great ideas whether in their influence on the intellect or the life. And as in the days of his flesh so now, but more so, his generous and immortal spirit pervades the universe. As Lord Rosebery said at Glasgow (21st July 1896), there is no doubt or question of the Ayrshire bard answering promptly to his name at the roll-call of the centuries: "The *adsum* of Burns rings out clear and unchallenged." And in that brief sentence, it seems to me, we have the perfect pearl of the Centenary rhetoric. It forms at least a pithy text from which to speak a parting word.

## XI.

By his early death Burns was doomed to be the poet of youthfulness. He is with Sidney and Marlowe, with Chatterton and Shelley and Keats who passed from earth while yet "the light that shone in them was crescent." But he was also privileged to exert during his brief span of life a formative and animating function; to become and to remain indeed the poet of hopeful endeavour and passionate delight, of fairer life and fuller love of humankind. Wherefore he is with Dante and Shakespeare and Goethe, the master-makers whose works not only reflect a nation or an era, but exert a bright and elevating ascendancy over other minds in every age and land; one of those "splendours of the firmament of time," in short, which neither dim nor die. Like the rustic lad in the fairy tale who had learned the language of the birds and could speak with the flowers face to face, he was found worthy to be wedded to Beauty; and, after the lapse of a hundred years, still reigns in deathless majesty, a living spiritual personality ruling the hearts and minds of men. And when there is a question of his humanising efficacy, his ennobling influence, it seems to me enough to ask one's self what we should have done without him, to think how much we should have missed him, and how he has salted and seasoned our fusty lives and daily conversation. "When the last gasp of agony has

announced that I am no more to those that knew me, and the few who loved me," he wrote in December 1789 to Mrs Dunlop, "shall I be yet warm in life . . . enjoying and enjoyed?" To one part of that question, uttered with almost prophetic consciousness of a coming incorporation with the glorious future of his race, every hour of every year in the dead century has rendered an emphatic and unequivocal answer. With him life ended, in the technical sense of the word, a hundred years ago; but the activities of which that life was the source were never so potent. The energies of his mighty intellectual nature are borne on the wings of Thought to every continent and quarter of the globe, and work a revolution at every stroke—in France and Germany, in Italy and Spain; in Africa, from Egypt to the Cape; in India, from the Punjab to the mouth of the Ganges; in Australia and New Zealand and the Oceana of the Pacific; in America, over the length and breadth of the land, from New York to San Francisco. Burns is *yet warm in life*, for in every region his thoughts and feelings have passed into the sum of man's mental and moral being. He still touches the heart-strings of humanity with shocks and thrills of emotion, the most fruitful and potential known to the poetry of these latter days. Now, more than ever, he is "a priest to us all of the wonder and bloom of the world." His Orphic song still teaches men to see with his eyes as a fresh revela-



tion the permanent facts and relations of life, the fundamental human emotions, the pure and transparent elements that exist for refreshment, for enjoyment, and for sympathy in external nature. Great in many respects, but greatest of all as a lyric poet who goes sheer through civilisation and touches the heart of universal Man, his name has successfully withstood the assaults of criticism and all the attacks that ignorance could suggest or malignity devise. No time can superannuate his passion-prompted songs from which a breath of spring still rises as of primroses and violets and the warble of woodlarks; and no shifting of the standard of excellence can ever displace him from the throne he now occupies in the immortal kingdom of creative art, or diminish the love and reverence felt for him by every heart that is capable of being inspired with something of his own charity and courage and love of truth. Tasso is for Italy, Heine for Germany, Béranger for France; but Burns, without whom the life of our Anglo-Saxon race would present a much greater appearance of insensibility, alone claims and keeps with Shakespeare the suffrages of the world!

Let us not speak of him then, as has been too much the habit, as an erring and rebellious spirit who with his own hands heaped ashes on his head. For, although battle was the breath of his being and his faults and failings were not few, he was

in some respects a man more sinned against than sinning—at once the founder and the martyr of the eighteenth-century reformation in art and life. Or as a “wayward and unchastened song-writer,” to take a typical phrase from the Laureate’s outpouring of watered praise at Irvine lately. For it was he who purged and purified Scottish song and changed the old minstrelsy from foul “dirt into the fragrance of lilies and violets,” as any one may discover by comparing his lyrics with the well-known collection published in 1769 by David Herd who bred in the land that creeping pestilence to which the puissant genius of Burns was destined to give a timely check. Or as one who was “first and last a local poet, the satirist and singer of a parish,” to quote the equally infelicitous criticism of Mr Henley. For although it is true that Burns often chose provincial themes, as Homer did, and that his verse is full of local allusions, his genius is deep and universal, as Homer’s own; and his sympathies and thoughts have something more catholic in them than can be referred to the passing moods of a local poet or the transient scenes of that provincial life which he painted with such power and fulness. Or as a luckless bard or “inheritor of unfulfilled renown.” For, though buffeted by Fate and doomed to an early grave like some hero of Hellenic story, the world in its moments of truest insight refuses to regard Burns as a “broken man;” and if Ruin’s ploughshare crushed the bard it left

unbroken and untarnished the flowers of his imperishable genius which blossomed in beauty to the very end. Or even as a dead singer. For, although he has passed beyond this visible diurnal sphere, from the toil of thought and the troubles of sensation, he has entered into the spiritual community of human souls, become part of the purer influence of humanity itself, and joined "the choir invisible"

Whose music is the gladness of the world.

His lark-like strains still flood the earth with piercing and mounting melody, powerful as ever to stir the hearts and shape the lives of men who know and love the pure true voice of nature and the Christ-like spirit that *should* pervade our common humanity.

Why then should we dwell on the failings of the man, or bemoan the untimely fate of the singer? Though snatched from life while his powers were yet in their spring freshness, he reached the true aureole of the Muse, and has entered into the highest heaven of Poetry. Why should we use the language of the grave in speaking of Robert Burns whose thoughts and feelings are immortal in the real and known work of life? He is still the young Marcellus of his nation who nurtures our higher emotions by his noble aspirations; a benignant influence ever with us and

conducting to the greatness of human kind ; a consoling acting personality whose thoughts and words survive to fill our hearts and ears with joy and music and furnish springs of hope and sympathy in distant generations.

He has outsoared the shadow of our night,  
Envy and calumny and hate and pain,  
And that unrest which men miscall delight,  
Can touch him not and torture not again.  
From the contagion of the world's slow stain  
He is secure ; and now can never mourn  
A heart grown cold, a head grown grey in vain—  
Nor, when the spirit's self has ceased to burn,  
With sparkless ashes load an unlamented urn.



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*By the same Author*

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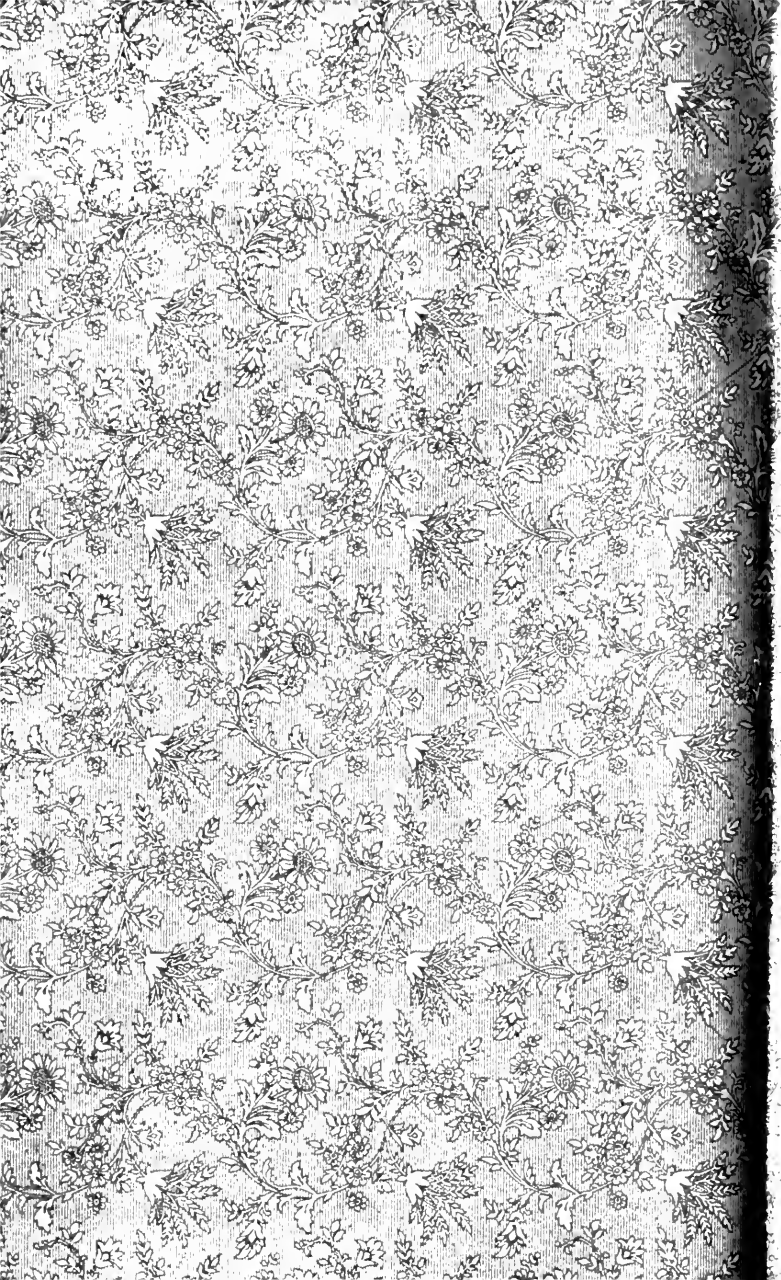
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